

THEY DID EVERYTHING BUT LEARN FROM IT:

THE BATTLE OF AP BAC, 1963

by

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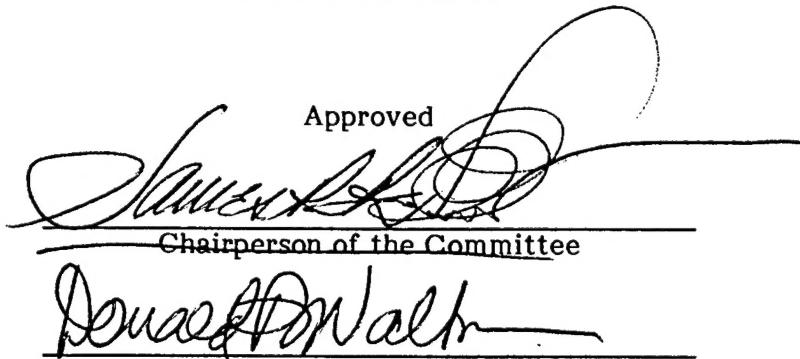
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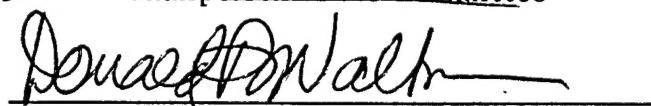
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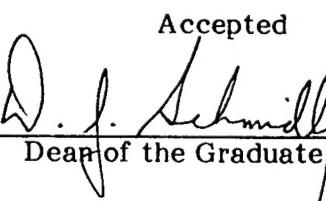


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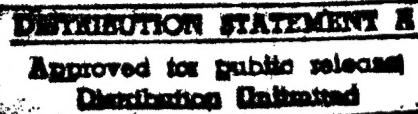
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The title for this work is based upon David Halberstam's observation in *The Making of a Quagmire*: "The Americans in Saigon were, in fact, to do everything but learn from it [the Battle of Ap Bac]" (147).

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAA .....	anti-aircraft artillery
ACR .....	armored cavalry regiment
AFNS .....	Army for National Salvation
ALO .....	air liaison officer
AP .....	armor piercing ammunition
APC .....	armored personnel carrier
ARVN .....	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
AT .....	anti-tank ammunition
BAR .....	Browning Automatic Rifle
BG .....	brigadier general
CG .....	Civil Guard (later, Regional Forces)
CHMAAG .....	Chief, Military Assistance Advisory Group
CINCPAC .....	Commander in Chief, Pacific
CINCUSARPAC .....	Commander in Chief, U.S. Army, Pacific
COMUSMACV .....	Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
COSVN .....	Central Office for South Vietnam
CP .....	command post
DRV .....	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
ELECT .....	electrical
FAC .....	forward air controller

FEC	French Expeditionary Corps
FO	forward observer
GEN	general
GVN	Government of Vietnam
HE	high explosive ammunition
HEAT	high explosive, anti-tank ammunition
HSAS	Headquarters, Support Activity, Saigon
ICC	International Control Commission
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
IN	infantry
INCEN	incendiary ammunition
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
KIA	killed in action
LCM	landing craft, medium
LCVP	landing craft, vehicle and personnel
LTG	lieutenant general
LZ	landing zone
MAAGI	Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indochina
MAAGV	Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAP	Military Assistance Program

MDAP	Mutual Defense Assistance Program
medevac	medical evacuation
MG	major general
NCO	noncommissioned officer
NLF	National Liberation Front
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PACOM	Pacific Command
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PERCUS	percussion
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
S3	operations officer
SDC	Self-Defense Corps (later, Popular Forces)
SP/4	specialist, fourth class
TDY	temporary duty
TERM	Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission
TOE	table of organization and equipment
TRCR	tracer ammunition
TRIM	Training Relations and Instructions Mission
USARPAC	U.S. Army, Pacific
USARV	U.S. Army, Vietnam

USASEC ..... U.S. Army Section  
USFV ..... U.S. Forces, Vietnam  
UTTHC ..... Utility Tactical Transport Helicopter  
Company  
VC ..... Viet Cong  
VNA ..... Vietnamese National Army  
WIA ..... wounded in action  
WP ..... white phosphorus ammunition

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

I claim we got a hell of a beating. We got run out of Burma and it is humiliating as hell. I think we ought to find out what caused it, go back and retake it.<sup>1</sup>

- Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell, May 1942.

Yes, I consider it [the Battle of Ap Bac] a victory. We took the objective.<sup>2</sup>

- General Paul Harkins, January 1963.

By the spring of 1942, the United States' war against Imperial Japan was off to an inauspicious start. America had lost a large part of its surface fleet at Pearl Harbor the previous December and lost the Philippines to the Japanese in early May. At the same time, Allied forces fighting in Burma suffered a series of defeats at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Army, ultimately resulting in the loss of Burma and the isolation of China. Although the situation in Burma looked bleak to the Allies by early May, the Roosevelt administration's press releases promised that the Allies would defeat the Japanese and maintain an overland route into China.

This policy of optimism even appeared in directives to the headquarters of Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell, commander of American forces in the China-Burma-India Theater. General George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, ordered Stilwell's

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Stilwell, *The Stilwell Papers*, ed. Theodore White (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948), 106.

<sup>2</sup>David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 158.

headquarters to maintain an “attitude of calm optimism with respect to [the] Chinese future” and to ensure that plans and conversations did not “imply any thought of helplessness in [the] situation.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, when Stilwell emerged from the Burmese jungles at the end of May 1942, he openly admitted defeat to reporters with his famous quote. Instead of blaming Stilwell for the defeat, the press lauded his honesty. A lead editorial in *The New York Times* observed that President Franklin D. Roosevelt, for all his inspiring rhetoric, “could learn something from General Stilwell,” and lesser officials could emulate him “both as to diction and as to policy.”<sup>4</sup> To the press, Stilwell’s honest appraisal was refreshing and demonstrated his grasp of the realities of Chinese political and military weakness.

Although fighting a different enemy in a different theater and time, General Paul Harkins, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), faced problems in 1962 similar to those of Stilwell. Both Stilwell and Harkins were responsible for advising foreign governments and leaders whose goals did not always match those of the United States. Both men sought to develop and train host-nation armies that could fight effectively. Both faced the difficulties of demonstrating progress to their military and political superiors.

Yet these two military men chose to approach their problems from vastly different perspectives. Stilwell, cynical and painfully direct, rarely offered a rosy outlook

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<sup>3</sup>Barbara Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), 384.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 385.

to his superiors, who intimated that he should do otherwise. He was continually in the field, evaluating the situation, commanding, leading. When he suffered a setback, he admitted it. He continually squabbled with Chiang Kai-shek, generalissimo of China, who successfully requested Stilwell's recall from China in late 1944. Stilwell's efforts paid dividends: by 1945, China had over 30 trained, equipped divisions that successfully drove the Japanese from Burma. Harkins, on the other hand, was not only a self-proclaimed optimist, but he also reflected the guidance of General Maxwell D. Taylor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and Harkins' mentor.<sup>5</sup> Of a staff officer mentality, the COMUSMACV rarely visited units in the field. Suggesting at the Honolulu Conference in July 1962 that the Government of Vietnam (GVN) would require only about one year to achieve victory once it began to apply pressure to the insurgents, Harkins continually gave the impression that the GVN was prosecuting successfully the war against the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF).<sup>6</sup> Even when the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) suffered setbacks in the field, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), put the reverses in the best possible light.

One notable reverse occurred in January 1963 near Ap Bac, a village in Dinh Tuong Province, 40 miles southwest of Saigon. Although the American advisors who were present characterized the battle as a defeat, both Harkins and Admiral Harry Felt, Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), and Harkins' immediate superior, proclaimed

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<sup>5</sup>General William B. Rosson, U.S. Army (Retired), Salem, VA, to author, Lubbock, TX, 16 September 1997. Author's collection, Lubbock, TX.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

it an ARVN victory. A reflection of the belligerents and their doctrines, and influenced by the terrain and the personalities involved, Ap Bac clearly demonstrated the deficiencies of the GVN, the ARVN, and the advisory system.

Unfortunately, MACV refused to acknowledge that there remained serious problems in Vietnam. While Stilwell admitted to the Burma defeat and was lauded by the press, MACV's proclamation that Ap Bac was a victory only served to raise the ire of the newsmen in Vietnam. Worse, instead of learning from Ap Bac and making necessary changes, as Stilwell and his headquarters had in Burma, Harkins and MACV continued on what would become a disastrous path for both Americans and Vietnamese in Southeast Asia.

## CHAPTER II

### ANTECEDENTS TO THE FIGHT

Adjusting to advising is a greater individual challenge than can be easily imagined by anyone who has not tried it.<sup>7</sup>

- Lieutenant General Dave Palmer

Although the armies that fought at Ap Bac were Vietnamese, most of their similarities ended there. Each army brought to the battlefield its heritage and experiences. How each belligerent fought at Ap Bac was not only a representation of its state in January 1963, but also a reflection of its past. The histories of the opponents speak as much about the outcome at Ap Bac as do the reports about the battle itself.

#### The Birth of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam

The ARVN traced its roots to the Vietnamese National Army (VNA).<sup>8</sup> Concluding a military conference with the Bao Dai government in Dalat on 8 December 1950, the French authorized the foundation of the VNA. Answering to the emperor, who served as the commander in chief, the VNA wore Vietnamese instead of French uniforms. Most of the officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were French, and

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<sup>7</sup>Dave Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 38.

<sup>8</sup>In October 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem, prime minister of Emperor Bao Dai, declared Vietnam a republic. The VNA then became the ARVN. In many sources, ARVN is used interchangeably with South Vietnamese Army (SVA). For clarity, I will use the term VNA for periods before the declaration of the Republic of Vietnam and ARVN for periods after.

those Vietnamese officers, NCOs, and soldiers serving in the French Army were transferred to the VNA.<sup>9</sup>

The VNA got off to an inauspicious start. More concerned with their own efforts to defeat the Viet Minh, the French did not make a concerted effort to establish a viable Vietnamese army. In May 1951 the VNA numbered fewer than 40,000 soldiers. Of 34 projected battalions, only 24 existed, some of which were ad hoc units, and only seven possessed Vietnamese officers.<sup>10</sup> By 1952, the VNA still did not have a general staff, a chief of staff, or even a full-time minister of defense. Worse, there were few senior officers to fill command and staff positions, let alone junior officers to fill company grade billets.<sup>11</sup> By the time of the Geneva Accords in July 1954, the VNA numbered 150,000 on paper. General J. Lawton Collins, acting as the American president's personal representative in Vietnam, reported in late 1954 that many battalions were severely understrength due to desertion and defection to the Viet Minh, and all lacked sufficient combat support and combat service support units.<sup>12</sup> In short, the VNA suffered from severe personnel and equipment shortages.

Shortly before the ARVN's birth, an event foreshadowed its role in the political life of the GVN. The VNA's chief of staff, General Nguyen Van Hinh, was an enemy of

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<sup>9</sup>Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 134.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 155.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 225.

Ngo Dinh Diem and, in August 1954, had been planning to establish another government with the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects.<sup>13</sup> Hinh, a French citizen and a French army officer who had married a French woman, originally received tacit French approval for his opposition to Diem.<sup>14</sup> Concerned about the danger Hinh posed to the GVN, the French and American governments pressured Bao Dai to call General Hinh to France for consultation in November 1954.<sup>15</sup> Few observers at the time realized this type of political maneuvering would remain a constant factor throughout the Vietnamese army's existence.

In late 1954 and early 1955, with Emperor Bao Dai still residing in France, Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem was the senior government official in South Vietnam, but he was not yet master in his own house. On 3 March 1955, Diem's rivals for power, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects and the Binh Xuyen crime organization, formed the United Front of Nationalist Forces. Not happy with Diem's recent political decisions, they issued an ultimatum demanding a new national government.<sup>16</sup> Diem reacted to this threat by calling on the VNA to destroy these rival political groups. Fighting against the Binh Xuyen lasted through the spring of 1955, finally ending in the crime syndicate's

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 233.

<sup>14</sup>Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 187, 219.

<sup>15</sup>Although originally willing to allow Hinh to challenge Diem, the French finally submitted to American wishes and agreed to support Diem. Spector, 237.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 243.

defeat in May. Diem then turned the army against the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao through the fall and winter of 1955-1956, using both military force and American dollars to persuade them to cease resistance.<sup>17</sup> By the spring of 1956, Diem had effectively neutralized his political rivals. The VNA, by now redesignated the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), was truly a weapon that Diem was not afraid to wield.

As Diem sought to put his house in order, the French and Americans struggled to define their roles in South Vietnam's future. Although the United States had established a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon in 1950, the French retained the initiative in prosecuting the First Indochina War against the Viet Minh. From early 1953, the MAAG offered to assist the French in training the VNA, but the French had no desire to allow the Americans to interfere with their efforts. More than willing to accept American financial and material aid in combating the Viet Minh, the French wanted no part of American instructors or training methods. In a discussion with Admiral Arthur Radford, CJCS, General Paul Ely, French commander in Vietnam, stated that American advisors and training would have undesirable effects on French prestige and the French political situation.<sup>18</sup>

After the signing of the Geneva Accords, the French agreed to maintain a presence in South Vietnam in the form of the French Expeditionary Corps, but they still wished to maintain control of the VNA's training and organization. Major General John

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<sup>17</sup>General William B. Rosson, U.S. Army (Retired), interview by author, 15 April 1997, Lubbock, TX, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

<sup>18</sup>Spector, 193 and *passim*.

O'Daniel, Chief, Military Assistance Advisory Group (CHMAAG), again offered to assist the French in training and organizing the Vietnamese.<sup>19</sup> With their influence in Vietnam waning, the French, recognizing the potential benefits of American assistance, agreed to allow the MAAG to participate in training the VNA for war. On 12 February 1955, the Franco-American Training Relations and Instructions Mission (TRIM) was founded. Technically under the command of General Ely, the TRIM actually fell under the day to day command of General O'Daniel.<sup>20</sup> America's role in the training of the Vietnamese had begun.

By March 1955, the TRIM was comprised of 209 French and 68 American officers. Throughout the remainder of 1955 and early 1956, the MAAG assigned 121 more American officers to the TRIM to replace the departing French.<sup>21</sup> The MAAG's concerns were not just about Vietnamese training but were also about equipping them. The French had shown little interest in establishing a functional logistical system for the ARVN. Consequently, as the French withdrew, thousands of tons of American equipment littered the Vietnamese countryside. Taking the best equipment with them,

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<sup>19</sup>O'Daniel actually was a lieutenant general. A former commander of U.S. Army, Pacific (USARPAC), he was demoted to major general to assume the position of Chief, U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (CHMAAG). This demotion was to salve French pride; the French government stated that O'Daniel was an acceptable nominee only if he were reduced in rank, in order not to be an equal to Lieutenant General Henri Navarre, the French commander in Vietnam. *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>20</sup>Department of the Army, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army* by James Collins, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 2-3.

<sup>21</sup>Spector, 252.

the French left the VNA with unserviceable and stripped military ordnance. By 28 April 1956, the last of the French Expeditionary Corps departed, leaving the United States to shoulder the majority of the burden in Vietnam.<sup>22</sup>

The MAAG struggled with how best to train and organize the ARVN. Between 1957 and 1959 alone, the MAAG developed over 200 different tables of organization and equipment (TOEs).<sup>23</sup> The U.S. military, however, was not the only agency concerned with the ARVN's training and organization. Throughout this period, the American ambassador and other State Department officials offered their solutions for how best to prepare the ARVN to defeat the communists. Although the ARVN slowly improved in readiness, American civilian and military organizations in Vietnam could not agree upon what training and organization would best suit the ARVN.

While organizing, training, and equipping an army are monumental tasks in themselves, they are made infinitely more difficult if undertaken while simultaneously attempting to defeat an insurgency. So it was with the ARVN. Although its early years were mainly occupied in assisting Diem to subdue his political enemies, by 1958, the ARVN began to face a larger threat: the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) or Viet Cong (VC), so named by the GVN to discourage the populace from associating it with the Viet Minh. Having defeated the French during the First Indochina War, the Viet Minh came to symbolize to many Vietnamese a nationalist organization which had

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<sup>22</sup>Department of the Army, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, 4-6.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 9.

triumphed over a colonial power. By renaming the Viet Minh the Viet Cong, the GVN emphasized the communist heritage of the Viet Minh.

### The People's Liberation Armed Forces

Although the PLAF originated in South Vietnam, it inherited many of its characteristics from the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), sometimes referred to as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). To better understand the PLAF, then, the historian must also examine the PAVN. The PAVN was born amidst the strife of the Second World War, but it traced its roots to the 1930s. During the Nghe-Tinh soviet movement of 1930, Vietnamese villagers attempted to overthrow the French colonial infrastructure and establish their own local governments. Anticipating French attempts to regain control, many villages formed self-defense units to protect their gains. Although the Indochinese Communist Party's (ICP) level of control remains unclear, the Party's provincial committee did attempt to coordinate the self-defense units to some degree.<sup>24</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap credited the Nghe An soviets' self-defense units as being the "embryo" of the PAVN.<sup>25</sup>

The PAVN's lineage continued through the military units organized during the Bac Son uprising. The uprising's beginnings remain a historical debate. According to Greg Lockhart, following a Japanese attack on French forces at Lang Son on 22-23

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<sup>24</sup>David Marr, *Vietnamese Traditions on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 380-381.

<sup>25</sup>Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1962), 50.

September 1940, the Vietnamese Restoration League began the Bac Son uprising with Japanese encouragement and weapons. Before the rebels could create much of a disturbance, the Japanese withdrew their support and allowed the French to chase the rebels back across the Chinese border.<sup>26</sup> Offering a differing interpretation, Thomas Hodgkin credits the Party cell in Bac Son with the decision to launch an armed insurrection against the French and Japanese. Not wanting to face a Vietnamese revolution, the Japanese allowed the French to quell the uprising through armed force.<sup>27</sup> Using guerrilla tactics, the Bac Son units made some initial gains against the French. Within a month, the French had suppressed the insurrection, and the Bac Son units went into hiding.

Regardless of the origins of the Bac Son uprising, its results were far-reaching. Recognizing the need for trained guerrilla units, the ICP, at the Seventh Plenum in November 1940, voted to maintain the Bac Son armed forces.<sup>28</sup> Soon thereafter, on 14 February 1941, the Party organized the Bac Son Guerrilla Unit. Following the Eighth Plenum in May 1941, the ICP then formed “The Army for National Salvation” (AFNS), of which the Bac Son Guerrilla Unit was the initial platoon.<sup>29</sup> From 1941 until mid-1943, French patrols successfully kept the AFNS from gaining support from the

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<sup>26</sup>Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 80-81.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Hodgkin, *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 292-293.

<sup>28</sup>Hodgkin, 293-294.

<sup>29</sup>Lockhart, 86.

people.<sup>30</sup> As the tide of the war in Europe shifted away from the Axis Powers, and French and Japanese relations became more strained, the French were less able to counter the AFNS's growth. By early 1944, the French, more concerned with the Japanese threat, no longer systematically targeted the AFNS, allowing it to gain significant numbers and support from the people.<sup>31</sup>

By late 1944, the ICP realized that the time was approaching for mobilizing mass support against the Japanese and French. Upon his return to Vietnam from China in September 1944, Ho Chi Minh issued instructions for the establishment of "The Propaganda Brigade of the Vietnam Liberation Army."<sup>32</sup> Taking their oaths on 22 December 1944, 34 Vietnamese under Vo Nguyen Giap's command officially formed the nucleus of the PAVN. Armed with two muskets, 17 rifles, 14 flintlocks, an American machine gun with 150 rounds, and a few hand grenades, the Propaganda Brigade attacked and destroyed two French outposts in Phai Khat and Na Ngan on 24 and 25 December 1944.<sup>33</sup> The PAVN's first engagements succeeded, foreshadowing many successes to come.

Although it suffered many losses during the First Indochina War, especially on the plains outside Hanoi in fall of 1951, the PAVN brought the war to a close by

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 87-92.

<sup>32</sup>Hodgkin, 319-320.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 320.

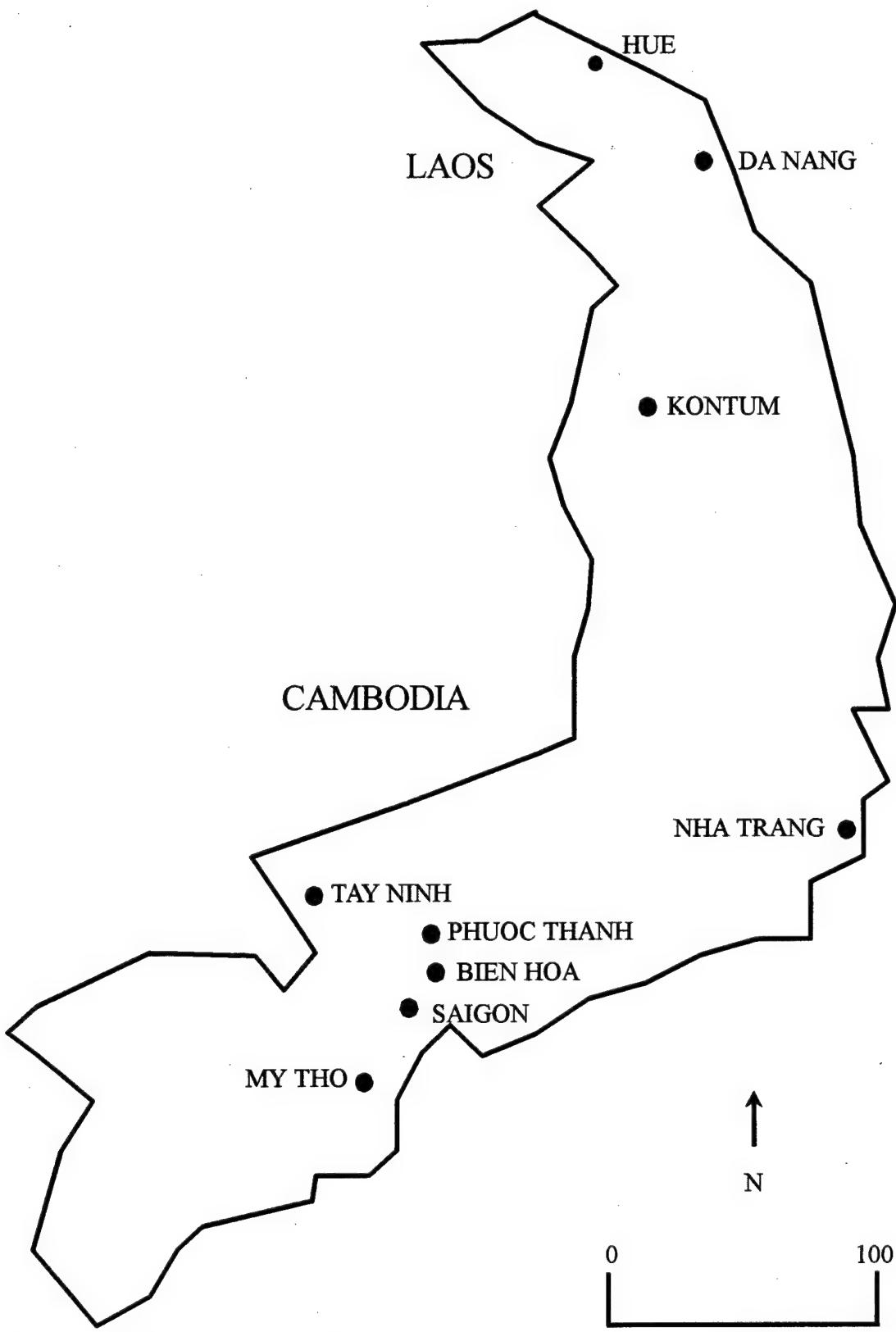


Figure 1. Map of South Vietnam

defeating the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Following the French defeat and the division of Vietnam into two separate regions, the Geneva Accords authorized PAVN forces in the South to return to the North. This provision offered the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) an opportunity to continue hostilities at a later time. Approximately 2500 PAVN cadre remained in the South with caches of arms and ammunition.<sup>34</sup> Although not officially named the “Liberation Army” until 15 February 1961, these cadres, or “armed propaganda units of former resistance members,” in conjunction with cadres infiltrated from the North in the late 1950s, formed the skeleton of the PLAF.<sup>35</sup>

Most accounts place the beginning of PLAF activity in 1959, but some offer 1957 as the first year of increased PLAF terror and intimidation.<sup>36</sup> Numbering some 9000 guerrillas in 1959, the PLAF began to contest GVN control of the Vietnamese countryside.<sup>37</sup> In July 1959, the ARVN deployed to the field to prevent disruption of the 30 August elections. In a memorandum to Brigadier General Edward Lansdale, Deputy

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<sup>34</sup>Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam* by George Harris et al., Pamphlet 550-40 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964), 319.

<sup>35</sup>Le Hong Linh et al., *Ap Bac: Major Victories of the South Vietnamese Patriotic Forces in 1963 and 1964* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1965), 15.

<sup>36</sup>The Congressional Research Service attributed the assassination of 400 minor GVN officials to the PLAF during 1957. Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Policy Toward Vietnam: A Summary Review of its History* by Ellen Collier et al. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1972), 32. (Folder 3, box 1, unit 2, Douglas Pike Collection, The Vietnam Archive [hereafter DPC]).

<sup>37</sup>Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam*, 320.

Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Lieutenant General Samuel Williams, CHMAAG, considered the ARVN sweep successful, since the elections went as planned. Williams also described what he considered an unfortunate side effect of the ARVN's sweep. Instead of operating in small harassing bands of three or four, the PLAF now began to mass in units of 30, 50, or 100 man elements, attacking Civil Guard (CG) detachments and isolated villages.<sup>38</sup>

The selection of targets was not confined to GVN outposts or isolated Vietnamese villages. On 8 July 1959, the PLAF attacked the ARVN 7th Division Advisory Detachment in Bien Hoa. As the Americans watched a movie in the mess hall at about 1900 hours, five to ten guerrillas, armed with small arms and homemade bombs, infiltrated the encampment. In the brief fire fight that ensued, two American advisors, one ARVN guard, one Vietnamese mess attendant, and one guerrilla lost their lives.<sup>39</sup> Gaining confidence in its abilities, the PLAF was no longer satisfied to limit its attacks to Vietnamese outposts. Throughout the fall of 1959, PLAF assassinations and kidnappings continued to rise, prompting Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow to express concern in a cable to the State Department.<sup>40</sup>

As 1960 began, the PLAF was preparing for another attack. The 32d ARVN Regiment had established a base camp near the village of Tran Sup, Tay Ninh Province.

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<sup>38</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, vol. I, *Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 320-321.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 220.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 303.

All three of the regiment's battalions rotated in and out of the camp, conducting sweeps in the area. At 0230 on 26 January 1960, approximately four PLAF companies numbering some 200 guerrillas attacked the camp. Completely surprising the ARVN units, the PLAF ran completely through the 1st and 2d Battalions, finally meeting resistance in the 3d Battalion area. After a 60 minute fire fight, the PLAF withdrew into the darkness, carrying its killed and wounded, as well as captured equipment.<sup>41</sup>

This attack was the most significant yet, both in terms of physical and psychological damage. The PLAF had destroyed two large barracks, the regimental headquarters, and four other buildings. It had also acquired a significant number of weapons with ammunition. The ARVN suffered 66 killed and wounded in action (KIA/WIA).<sup>42</sup> More disconcerting was the level of preparedness demonstrated by the PLAF and its effects on the confidence of the ARVN command. In a letter to a subordinate, General Williams noted:

The VC had the place well reconnoitered. They knew most of the Regiment was gone, they knew exactly where the arms rooms were, they knew exactly which building individual officers slept in and they headed for them. This affair really put the [South] Vietnamese in a tizzy.<sup>43</sup>

The PLAF was becoming more brazen in its attacks. By the fall of 1960, Ambassador Durbrow cabled the State Department that the PLAF was even conducting terror in Saigon itself.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 343.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 296.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 344.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 544.

Before continuing this discussion, one must look at the relationship between the PAVN and the PLAF. Some argue that the PLAF was simply a puppet of the PAVN. Colonel Bui Tin, a PAVN general staff officer, when asked if the NLF was an independent movement, stated plainly: "No. It was set up by our Communist Party. . . . We always said there was only one party."<sup>45</sup> Others contend that the PLAF was independent of PAVN control and was uninfluenced by the Lao Dong.<sup>46</sup> The truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. Attempting to begin a political movement to support the PLAF's guerrilla activity, the Lao Dong's Third Party Congress in late 1960 publicly urged the South Vietnamese to "establish the worker-farmer-soldier coalition, and . . . set up a large and united anti-U.S.-Diem National Front." Secretly, the Lao Dong issued orders to consolidate the Party's Nam Bo and Trung Bo regions under the Committee for South Vietnam (COSVN), which served as the central committee for the southern branch of the Party and reported directly to the Central Committee in Hanoi.<sup>47</sup>

Acting on the Lao Dong's exhortations, the insurgents established the National Liberation Front on 20 December 1960.<sup>48</sup> Present at the NLF's birth was Nguyen Van

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<sup>45</sup>Stephen Young, "How North Vietnam Won the War," *The Wall Street Journal* (August 3, 1995): A10.

<sup>46</sup>In 1945, Ho Chi Minh disbanded the ICP, only to resurrect it in 1951 as the *Dang Lao Dong Viet Nam* (Vietnam Worker's Party), or Lao Dong. Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1966), 43, 137.

<sup>47</sup>Edward Doyle et al., *The North, The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1986), 25, 27.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 25.

So, a Lao Dong Central Committee member, and Vo Van Kiet, the Lao Dong secretary in charge of Saigon, Cholon, and Giadinh.<sup>49</sup> Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, a PAVN officer and a native Southerner, served as head of both the COSVN's and NLF's Military Affairs Committees.<sup>50</sup> These key individuals in the NLF, affiliated with the Lao Dong and COSVN as well, demonstrated that there were ties between the two political organizations.

Yet the Lao Dong did not completely control the NLF, and hence the PLAF. Southern insurgents, many of whom were not Party members, dominated all levels and organizations within the COSVN and NLF. At the outset, the southern insurgents initially controlled their destiny.<sup>51</sup> As the war progressed, the Lao Dong continually exerted its influence in the South. Through its contribution of more resources, the Party came to direct more fully the NLF's activities. As Truong Nhu Tang, a former NLF official, observed: "As a result [of more contributed resources], the NLF had found itself even more dominated by the Party and the Northern government."<sup>52</sup> Still, while progressively exerting more influence within the NLF as the war continued, the Lao Dong was never able to control completely the southern insurgency. Describing an attack in 1974 against Loc Ninh, General Tra implied the COSVN's flexibility in the

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<sup>49</sup>Truong Nhu Tang et al., *A Vietcong Memoir* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985), 77, 82-83.

<sup>50</sup>Doyle et al., *The North*, 27.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Truong Nhu Tang et al., 131.

execution of Party ordered missions: "Thus we carried out the order of the Military Commission *creatively and in a manner completely in accord with the situation in the B2 theater at that time* [emphasis added]."<sup>53</sup>

As 1961 progressed, the NLF and PLAF increased their pressure on the GVN. By late summer, the PLAF began to prepare for its largest offensive to this point in the war. In a memorandum to Admiral Felt, Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr, CHMAAG, reported that the PLAF was massing battalion-sized elements along the Laotian border. Armed with a combination of captured and infiltrated weapons, including submachine guns, automatic rifles, machine guns, and mortars, the PLAF posed a significant threat.<sup>54</sup> The blow was soon to fall.

On 1 September 1961, the PLAF attacked and occupied Poko and Dakha, villages in Kontum Province, some 300 miles north of Saigon, with between two and three battalions. Wearing khaki uniforms into battle for the first time, the PLAF inflicted 19 ARVN KIA at an expense of 100 of its own KIA. Offering his analysis in a memorandum to the State Department, H. Francis Cunningham, the Counsel-General of the U.S. Embassy, observed that the size of the attack and the use of uniforms indicated a possible massing of larger PLAF formations and signaled a prelude to larger attacks.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Tran Van Tra, *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B2 Theater*, vol. 5, *Concluding the 30 Years' War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Indochina Archive, 1995), 69.

<sup>54</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. I, *Vietnam, 1961* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 297.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 292.

Cunningham's analysis proved accurate. On 17/18 September, the PLAF registered a "first" when, with three battalions, it captured and occupied Phuoc Thanh, the capital of Phuoc Thanh Province, approximately 50 miles north of Saigon, despite the two ARVN ranger companies in the area. Making the most of its occupation, the PLAF conducted a "people's trial" in the marketplace and executed the province chief and his assistant.<sup>56</sup>

These aggressive operations did not escape the notice of the International Control Commission (ICC). Acting on a GVN request to rule on the nature of the increased insurgent activity, the ICC queried the PAVN High Command about its role in the offensive. The ICC published the PAVN High Command's response in its "Special Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam," dated 2 June 1962:

The PAVN High Command will resolutely reject all decisions taken by the International Commission relating to the so-called "subversive activities" in South Vietnam, a question which has no relevance to the Geneva Agreement.

The PAVN's response aside, the ICC found

[t]hat in specific instances there is evidence to show that armed and unarmed personnel, arms, munitions and other supplies have been sent from the Zone in the North to the Zone in the South with the object of supporting, organizing and carrying out hostile activities, including armed attacks, directed against the Armed Forces and Administration of the Zone of the South. [Further, t]here is evidence to show that the PAVN has allowed the Zone in the North to be used for inciting, encouraging and supporting hostile activities in the Zone in the South, aimed at the overthrow of the

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 305-306.

Administration in the South, [violating Articles 10, 19, 24, and 27 of the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam].<sup>57</sup>

Although the ICC's report clearly indicted both the insurgents and the PAVN, it was little comfort to the GVN, which faced mounting pressure from the insurgency.

Throughout the fall of 1961 and spring of 1962, the ARVN continued to conduct combat operations against the PLAF. The GVN seemed to be making gains. With the introduction of the strategic hamlet program, the insurgency appeared to be diminishing as the number of villagers under GVN "control" rose ever higher. Pleasing to the MAAG, the number of ARVN combat operations were at an all time high. Yet, a troubling contradiction appeared. While PLAF casualties mounted, so did the ARVN's; by February 1962, the ARVN was suffering nearly 3000 KIA/WIA per month.<sup>58</sup>

The PLAF also modified its tactics. Realizing that the GVN's hamlet program might deprive the guerrillas of the villagers' support, the PLAF targeted the strategic hamlets. Further, although initially terrified of the newly-introduced American helicopters, the PLAF developed anti-helicopter tactics, the efficacy of which became brutally clear at Ap Bac.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Policy Current Documents, 1962* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 1104.

<sup>58</sup>Terence Maitland et al., *Raising the Stakes, The Vietnam Experience* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1982), 14.

<sup>59</sup>Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 445.

Through the fall of 1962, the GVN and MACV were guardedly optimistic about subduing the insurgency, but there were still troubling manifestations of the PLAF's strength. On 5 October, near Ap My Luong, Dinh Tuong Province, 40 miles south of Saigon, the PLAF withstood an air assault by eleven H-21s carrying a 90 man ranger company. Within minutes of landing, the rangers suffered 13 KIA and 34 WIA, which effectively decimated one platoon. Although the GVN claimed 100 PLAF KIA, the insurgents disappeared into the countryside, frustrating yet another attempt to fix them in place. The Vietnamese were not the only ones to die; the crew chief of one of the H-21s was killed, bringing the total number of Americans killed in Vietnam since December 1961 to 13.<sup>60</sup> On the eve of Ap Bac, although the GVN and MACV seemed pleased with the progress of the ARVN's combat operations and the GVN's counterinsurgency plans, the American advisors in the field believed otherwise.

#### The American Advisor

The American advisor and how he fit into the Vietnam endeavor was a consistently troubling subject for both military and civilian leaders, American and Vietnamese alike. With the establishment of the TRIM in 1955, Americans began to have a direct impact on the ARVN. How direct those effects needed to be, however, changed as the American presence in Southeast Asia increased. As late as 1959, MAAGV and CINCPAC still believed that an advisory role was best accomplished at

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<sup>60</sup>"American Killed in Vietnam Clash," *The New York Times* (5 October 1962); United States Information Service, Release P-139-62. (Folder 16, box 2, unit 2, DPC).

Vietnamese higher headquarters. General Williams felt that the advisor's duties included taking to the field with the headquarters he advised, offering assistance in tactical and logistical questions, and submitting training equipment requests. At no time, however, was the advisor to accompany small units in combat: "It has never been my intent to suggest that advisors accompany attacking units or get into fire fights."<sup>61</sup> To Williams, the prosecution of combat was best left to Vietnamese officers and NCOs.

Attempting to codify the advisor's role, Admiral Felt issued a directive to Williams on 25 May 1959, ordering that

[t]he activities of MAAG Advisors must be limited to advisory functions and under no circumstances shall they participate directly in combat operations nor will they accompany units on anti-guerrilla operations in areas immediately adjacent to national boundaries.<sup>62</sup>

Yet with the increase of PLAF activity in 1960 and 1961, American advisors began to accompany small units in combat. Wishing to support the MAAG's desire for increased ARVN combat operations, the advisors took to the field in an attempt to stimulate ARVN aggressiveness.

American advisors assumed their positions with little training in advising or Vietnamese language and culture. There was no formal schooling for advisors until early 1962, when the U.S. Army Special Forces School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, established a six week advisory course. Focused primarily on conventional infantry

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<sup>61</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, vol. I, *Vietnam*, 182-183.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 200.

tactics, the course offered no instruction on Vietnamese language or culture. What the advisors learned about the Vietnamese usually came from their interaction with them. While Washington ordered officers and NCOs to Vietnam, the MAAG actually assigned them as advisors to ARVN units, usually after they had served at the MAAG for a period of time.<sup>63</sup>

The officer and NCO advisors were highly trained professionals. In a memorandum of conversation, Roger Hilsman, the State Department's Director of Intelligence and Research, noted in early 1963 that "what is really saving us out here is the high quality of the sergeants, lieutenants, and captains."<sup>64</sup> Yet, being a professional soldier did not necessarily equate to being a suitable advisor because "[a]djusting to advising is a greater individual challenge than can be easily imagined by anyone who has not tried it. . . . Skill in advising is a reflection of one's own ability to influence other individuals."<sup>65</sup> Having no formal command authority, the advisor could make suggestions to his counterpart; he could cajole, plead, or beg, but the decision ultimately fell to the unit commander. In essence, the advisor had no real leverage over his counterpart other than personal persuasion.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Department of the Army, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* by Donn Starry, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 19-20.

<sup>64</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. III, *Vietnam, January-August 1963* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), 10.

<sup>65</sup>Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 38-39.

<sup>66</sup>Halberstam, 139.

Further complicating the advisor's role was that although he had no authority, the MAAG held him responsible for his unit's performance. Just as General George C. Marshall had asked some twenty years before, the chain of command, to include the MAAG, CINCPAC, the JCS, and the Executive Branch, expected the advisors to maintain a positive outlook. The senior leadership encouraged advisors to cast the best possible light on their units. Reporting unsavory, yet truthful, facts became known as "negativism."<sup>67</sup> Because the MAAG and, later, MACV required positive reports, what they received was what they expected of the advisors: upbeat, yet "truthful" reports. Since most advisors were professionals and wished to make the Army their career, few were willing to directly address their units' problems in their monthly reports. Although the advisors did not actually deceive their higher command, their emphasis on the positive aspects tended to cloud over the more troubling difficulties of the ARVN. As one former advisor pointed out, a general officer can resign in protest and look forward to retirement pay; a company grade officer who resigns can look forward to the unemployment line.<sup>68</sup>

The difficulties the advisors faced with the Vietnamese often bred what David Halberstam calls the "Asian reality."<sup>69</sup> A type of cynicism, the "Asian reality" caused the advisors to realize the truth in Rudyard Kipling's warning that

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<sup>67</sup>Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 168.

<sup>68</sup>James R. Reckner, Ph.D., Texas Tech University, suggested this dichotomy.

<sup>69</sup>Halberstam, 108.

It is not good for the Christian's health  
to hustle the Asian brown,  
for the Christian riles and the Asian smiles  
and he weareth the Christian down.<sup>70</sup>

Yet the Americans approached their task with a sense of humor and commitment.<sup>71</sup>

Completely defeating totalitarian regimes twenty years earlier, maintaining Korean safety only ten years earlier, and embodying the Kennedy "can-do spirit," American advisors sought to superimpose their way of conducting war on the Vietnamese. Confident of the righteousness of their cause and of ultimate victory, the advisors sought to steer the ARVN to victory.

American advisors initially remained at higher ARVN command levels. In 1959, the MAAG maintained advisors at the army, corps, division, and regimental levels. Additional advisors oversaw the artillery and tank battalions.<sup>72</sup> By 1962, the number of advisors had increased significantly. From the ARVN General Staff level to regimental level, the advisory detachment contained a senior advisor and a staff to mirror the ARVN staff. At the battalion level, two company grade officers and an NCO comprised the advisory team. Beginning in 1962, 36 of the 43 Vietnamese provinces also received advisory teams consisting of a field grade senior advisor, an intelligence NCO, a light

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<sup>70</sup>Lewy, 168.

<sup>71</sup>Halberstam, 108.

<sup>72</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, vol. I, *Vietnam*, 182.

weapons advisor, an administration specialist, a communications specialist, and a medical specialist.<sup>73</sup>

Not only were more Americans advising ARVN units, but, with the introduction of helicopters in 1961, the number of logistical and ordnance personnel blossomed as well. Finding it increasingly difficult to coordinate its units' efforts, the MAAG was reaching the limit of its command and control capabilities. By late 1961, senior U.S. officials, both civilian and military, felt that the American efforts in Vietnam required a larger headquarters with farther-reaching authority and increased assets. The United States sought to improve the unity of its efforts through MACV.

#### Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

The seeds for MACV were sown on the Korean peninsula in late 1950. Believing that French success against the Viet Minh was important to stability in the region, the Department of Defense organized the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indochina (MAAGI), on 17 September 1950. Brigadier General Francis Brink assumed command on 10 October and formally assembled his headquarters on 20 November. Firmly focused on the happenings in Korea, the MAAG's mission was solely one of support for the French. Under the Mutual Defense Assistance Program (MDAP), the U.S. provided thousands of tons of equipment to the French in Vietnam. The MAAG provided the technical assistance to maintain the equipment. As the MAAG was

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<sup>73</sup>Maitland et al., 11.

authorized only 128 officers and soldiers, training of the VNA was strictly a French affair.<sup>74</sup>

Throughout the First Indochina War, the MAAG focused on supporting the materiel efforts of the French. Although the Americans made some overtures to assist in training the VNA, the French chose to maintain responsibility for Vietnamese readiness. With the signing of the Geneva Accords, the situation in Vietnam changed drastically. Article 16 of the Accords directed that no additional foreign troops enter Vietnam. By that time, the MAAG had grown to 342: 128 advisors, the remainder Air Force technicians.<sup>75</sup> Constrained by the Accords, the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (renamed from MAAGI in late 1955) remained at 342 after the departure of the French in early 1956. With the majority of personnel (217) in advisory capacities, the logistical effort in Vietnam suffered tremendously.<sup>76</sup>

As early as January 1955, members of Congress expressed concern to the Department of the Army about the ultimate disposition of equipment provided to the French under the MDAP. With the withdrawal of French forces, the Congressmen believed that if care was not taken, large quantities of American equipment could fall into

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<sup>74</sup>Department of the Army, *Command and Control: 1950-1969* by George Eckhardt, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), 7.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 12.

the hands of the Communists.<sup>77</sup> In November 1955, the Army dispatched a special mission to Vietnam under the leadership of General Lawton, the Army's Chief of the Budget. His team found that the MAAG could not simultaneously support training and logistics. The ARVN, in his estimate, could not conduct sustained combat operations because of its tremendous logistical difficulties. Thousands of tons of equipment lay in heaps all over the Vietnamese countryside because the French had opened all crates on delivery, making it impossible to account for or locate specific shipments.<sup>78</sup> In short, lack of Vietnamese logistical expertise, French self-interest, and personnel constraints imposed by the Geneva Accords made it nearly impossible for the MAAG to support effectively the ARVN.

The Department of State, in coordination with the Department of Defense, offered a solution to the MAAG in February 1956. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, in a cable to General Williams, described an "additional military logistical group . . . [that] would operate under, though not as formal part of, MAAG-Viet Nam."<sup>79</sup> Formal authorization followed two months later from Dulles:

A Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission of 350 American military personnel is created for the purpose of both supervising the recovery and outshipment of excess MDAP equipment in Viet Nam and of assisting in the improvement of Vietnamese logistical capabilities.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957*, vol. I, *Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), 52.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 617-618.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 640.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 669-670.

The State Department informed the ICC that the total number of American servicemen in Vietnam would not exceed 740, allowing an overlap of 48 to account for those on leave, travel status, and so forth. As Dulles further directed, there would "not be actually more than 692 personnel physically present in Viet Nam at any one time, including TDY's [servicemen on temporary duty], but excluding overlaps."<sup>81</sup>

Recognizing that this directive might violate the Geneva Accords, both the State and Defense Departments agreed to delay arrivals until 9 May, "thus leaving what appears to us reasonable time for Commission consideration." Regardless of the ICC's decision, the MAAG was going to get its increase in personnel. Although both the State and Defense Departments conceived the TERM as temporary in nature, the MAAG saw the additional authorizations as a way to reduce its focus on logistical requirements and to get back to the business of training. Never having received ICC approval or disapproval of the TERM, the MAAG completely absorbed it by late 1959.<sup>82</sup>

By 1960, with the increase in ARVN operations against the PLAF, the MAAG once again requested an increase in personnel authorization. Since the TERM personnel who had been absorbed by the MAAG were only in Vietnam on temporary duty, General Williams requested that the MAAG's assigned personnel cap be raised from 342 to 685, nearly 200 less than the original ceiling placed by the Geneva Accords. On 5 May, the

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<sup>81</sup>The total of 692 included both the MAAG authorization (342) and the TERM authorization (350). *Ibid.*, 671.

<sup>82</sup>Spector, 261-262.

Defense Department agreed, allowing yet another increment in the ever-increasing American presence in Vietnam.<sup>83</sup>

After the PLAF offensive of September 1961, President John F. Kennedy dispatched to Vietnam his military representative, General Maxwell D. Taylor, to evaluate the situation. After numerous briefings and visits, Taylor on 3 November 1961 recommended that “[t]he MAAG, Vietnam . . . be reorganized and increased in size as may be necessary by the implementation of these recommendations [included in his report].”<sup>84</sup>

In reaction to Taylor’s recommendations, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara called a meeting of senior commanders in Hawaii.<sup>85</sup> There, on 16 December 1961, McNamara, Ambassador Frederick Nolting, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs William Bundy, General Lyman Lemnitzer, CJCS, Admiral Felt, and General McGarr, in a closed meeting, agreed not to discuss a commander for U.S. Forces, Vietnam (USFV), during the open briefing that was to follow.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>The Accords ceiling of 888 was the sum of both American and French advisors present in Vietnam in July 1954. Williams’ rationale was that since the French were no longer present, their last advisors having left in late 1957, an increase in the MAAG was warranted. Department of the Army, *Command and Control*, 15.

<sup>84</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. I, *Vietnam, 1961*, 481.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 679.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 739.

After opening the meeting to the lower ranking staff, McNamara stressed the need for U.S. success in Vietnam. He continued that short of the already imposed exclusion of combat forces from Vietnam, no request was unreasonable because money was no object. The issue of the new command in Vietnam did not come up.<sup>87</sup> Upon his return to Washington, McNamara sent a note on 18 December to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, asking to confirm Rusk's agreement with the creation of "U.S. Military Assistance Forces-Vietnam" and the duties and responsibilities of the new commander.<sup>88</sup> Because the MAAG was to retain direct responsibility for the advisory effort and remain a subordinate unit, the term "Advisory" was not included in the new command's title.

The Defense Department saw the new command arrangement as the next logical step in directing American efforts in Vietnam, but State Department officials held mixed feelings about the introduction of a larger command. Earlier in December 1961, Rusk had agreed with Deputy Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson, who argued that the appointment of a U.S. "commander" would amount to an "irrevocable and 100% commitment to saving South Vietnam."<sup>89</sup> This larger command was not simply the next logical step; it also implied that GVN and ARVN efforts were insufficient, requiring increased American support and direction.<sup>90</sup> Rusk, responding to McNamara that same day, believed that the title "Commander, U.S. Military Assistance

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 740.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 745.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 702.

<sup>90</sup>Ben Newcomb, Ph.D., Texas Tech University, suggested this implication.

Command-Vietnam" was more appropriate; in Rusk's view, the term "Forces" implied the presence of organized military units beyond which the U.S. planned to send to Vietnam.<sup>91</sup> Rusk got his way; General Paul Harkins became Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, on 7 February 1962.<sup>92</sup>

Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), was envisioned as a temporary headquarters that would supplement the MAAG and "enable the U.S. to carry out more effectively the expanded assistance and support requested by the Government of the Republic of Vietnam."<sup>93</sup> Authorized 216 personnel, 113 of whom were Army, MACV would disband after the GVN had brought the insurgency under control, thus restoring the MAAG to primacy in Vietnam. Although Harkins was the senior military advisor to the Diem government and commanded all American troops in Vietnam, he delegated his command authority to Major General Charles Timmes, the CHMAAG.<sup>94</sup>

The command relationship between Harkins and Timmes was complex. Harkins answered to CINCPAC, was directly responsible for U.S. military policy, and was authorized to discuss military operations with Diem and other key Vietnamese leaders. Although the MAAG remained a separate entity, Timmes was responsible to Harkins and MACV for advisory and other operational matters. At the same time, Timmes also

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<sup>91</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. I, *Vietnam, 1961*, 746.

<sup>92</sup>Department of the Army, *Command and Control*, 23.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.; United States Information Service, Release P-22-62. (Folder 9, box 2, unit 1, DPC).

<sup>94</sup>Department of the Army, *Command and Control*, 28-29.

administered the Military Assistance Program (MAP), answering directly to CINCPAC for its execution.<sup>95</sup>

A new organization, MACV faced challenges. The parallel structure of MACV and the MAAG caused a certain amount of duplication between the two headquarters. Further, MACV had to reestablish relationships already formed by the MAAG.<sup>96</sup> Difficulties also lay in the competence of its staff. While the company and field grade advisors were competent, as one State Department observer noted, “[t]he poorest people are at the staff level in all of the agencies.”<sup>97</sup> In short, on the eve of Ap Bac, MACV faced the challenges of how best to organize itself and the ARVN to combat the ever-increasing effectiveness of the PLAF insurgency.

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>97</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. III, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 11.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BELLIGERENTS

It is our clear impression that, by and large, training and equipment of the Vietnamese Armed Forces are still too heavily weighted toward conventional military operations.<sup>98</sup>

-Taylor Report, 3 November 1961

Influenced by opposing doctrinal forces, the ARVN and the PLAF espoused different conceptions of how to prosecute the war in South Vietnam. Steeped in the traditions of victory through conventional war, U.S. advisors consistently taught and encouraged the ARVN to employ strictly military strategies and tactics. Although the MAAG began to acknowledge the importance of counterinsurgency by the early 1960s, most senior advisors remained committed to defeating the PLAF through conventional military operations. It is not surprising, then, that the ARVN mirrored closely the U.S. Army, a conventionally-oriented force, in doctrine, strategy, tactics, and organization.

The PLAF, on the other hand, sought from the beginning to defeat the ARVN with a combination of political and military means. The cadres' experiences during the First Indochina War taught them that a military victory without a corresponding success among the people was hollow. As a result, the PLAF embraced a revolutionary doctrine, with the resulting unconventional strategy, tactics, and organization. Ap Bac demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of each belligerent's conception of warfare.

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<sup>98</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. I, *Vietnam, 1961*, 497-498.

### The Army of the Republic of Vietnam's Doctrine, Strategies, Tactics, and Organization

Put simply, doctrine is how an army plans to fight. An army's doctrine is influenced by its heritage, perceived role, recent experiences, and how it either wants or expects to fight its next war. Doctrine influences all aspects of an army, from how it trains to what it wears. The U.S. Army is no exception to this generalization. The U.S. Army's capstone document, Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*, establishes the framework for all other documents and activities the Army produces or undertakes. For an historian to understand the thoughts and actions of the U.S. advisors from 1954 to 1963, then, he or she must examine FM 100-5 to gain an insight into how the MAAG envisioned the ARVN should prosecute the war and how it should be organized.

Without question, the U.S. Army of the late 1950s and early 1960s was an army imbued with an offensive and conventional nature.<sup>99</sup> After a major revision in September 1954 which incorporated the Army's conventional warfare lessons from Korea, *Operations* received only minor changes in December 1954 (change 1), July 1956 (change 2), and January 1958 (change 3).<sup>100</sup> *Operations* was reissued in February 1962 to reflect innovations in technology and warfare, but it is similar in many respects to its

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<sup>99</sup>For the purposes of this work, conventional warfare refers to traditional methods of fighting; unconventional refers to guerrilla or insurgency warfare.

<sup>100</sup>Department of the Army, *Field Service Regulations-Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1958), inside front cover.

1954 predecessor.<sup>101</sup> Both the 1954 and 1962 versions, which the American advisors used as their doctrinal reference points, embody a traditional, conventional attitude.

The manual begins its chapter on operational concepts with the principles of war. Listing the first as the “Principle of the Objective,” *Operations* states that “[t]he ultimate military objective of war is the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces and his will to fight. The objective of each operation must contribute to this ultimate objective.”<sup>102</sup> In quite direct terms, *Operations* emphasizes that the focus of any war should be the enemy’s forces. Immediately thereafter, the “Principle of the Offensive” directs that “[o]ffensive action is necessary to achieve decisive results and to maintain freedom of action.”<sup>103</sup> While maintaining the initiative is preferable in any operation, conventional or unconventional, these principles, when taken together, work against the focus of a counterinsurgency effort. Instead of focusing the Army’s efforts on maintaining the people’s loyalties, they emphasize the urgency in targeting and destroying the enemy forces.

Although the Army was advising and organizing a force which was combating an insurgency, the 1954 version of *Operations* contains barely two pages of text devoted to

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<sup>101</sup>Because the manual’s original issue date is 1954, the term “1954 version” refers to the 1954 base document with posted changes.

<sup>102</sup>Department of the Army, *Field Service Regulations-Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962), 46.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.

defeating guerrillas.<sup>104</sup> Recognizing the innovations in warfare, the 1962 edition of *Operations* contains chapters on airmobile operations and irregular warfare. Devoting a short chapter to “Military Operations Against Irregular Forces,” the 1962 FM 100-5 concedes that “[i]mmediate decisive results of operations against irregular forces can seldom be observed.”<sup>105</sup> Yet, in its discussion of the concept of operations, the manual states that “[o]perations to suppress and eliminate irregular forces are primarily offensive in nature. Thus, the conventional force must plan for and seize the initiative at the outset and retain it throughout the conduct of the operation.”<sup>106</sup> This latter emphasis on seizing the initiative appears to nullify the manual’s earlier warning about maintaining tactical patience and not expecting immediate results against insurgents.

*Operations*’ 1962 version describes counterinsurgency activities as essentially continuous small unit actions focused on destroying the unconventional forces. Although recognizing that the population’s support is necessary for success, the manual makes only passing suggestions as to how best to gain the people’s approval.<sup>107</sup> It is no small wonder, then, that the U.S. Army sought to mold the ARVN into a conventional, offensively-minded force.

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<sup>104</sup>Department of the Army, *Field Service Regulations-Operations*, 1958, 171-173.

<sup>105</sup>Department of the Army, *Field Service Regulations-Operations*, 1962, 137.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 139.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 140-142.

The experiences of the advisors also played a role in how they envisioned what the ARVN should accomplish. Some advisors had World War II experience; many more had experience fighting the North Koreans and Chinese in Korea. Major General Thomas Trapnell, CHMAAG and a Korean War veteran, firmly believed that the greatest threat to South Vietnam lay in the potential invasion from the North. Arguing for a “Korea model,” Trapnell consistently reminded his staff to “remember the lessons of Korea.”<sup>108</sup> Major General John O’Daniel, Trapnell’s successor and also a Korea veteran, continued along the conventional path. Despite the National Intelligence Estimate of 17 July 1956, which stated that “[w]e believe that the Communist ‘Democratic Republic of Vietnam’ (DRV) [original quotes] will not attempt an open invasion of South Vietnam . . . during the period of the estimate,” O’Daniel organized, equipped, and trained the ARVN along the lines of a conventional army.<sup>109</sup> In his view, the paramilitary organizations would be more than suitable for providing internal security against the sporadic violence in the countryside.<sup>110</sup>

By early 1959, Diem began to resist the MAAG’s efforts to transform the ARVN into a thoroughly conventional army. Perhaps realizing that a force trained and organized along conventional lines could not defeat the insurgency or possibly resenting

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<sup>108</sup>General William B. Rosson, U.S. Army (Retired), interview by author, 15 April 1997, Lubbock, TX, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

<sup>109</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957*, vol. I, *Vietnam*, 720; General William B. Rosson, U.S. Army (Retired), interview by author, 15 April 1997, Lubbock, TX, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

<sup>110</sup>Spector, 272-273.

the rumors that he submitted to every American recommendation, Diem suggested including counter-guerrilla training in the MAAG's training program. As two senior ARVN commanders, Generals Cao Van Vien and Dong Van Khuyen, write:

The nature and purpose of this training effort . . . was purely conventional; it did not help combat units cope with the unconventional requirements of counterinsurgency warfare and fight it effectively. Many unit commanders in effect complained of having to "learn one way and practice another way." Naturally, U.S. Army doctrine and field manuals served as the guide and yardstick in developing ARVN combat capabilities.<sup>111</sup>

What ensued over the next two years was a running debate between the CHMAAG, Lieutenant General Samuel Williams and his successor Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr, Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, and Diem over the focus of the ARVN. Durbrow, seeing the logic in Diem's arguments, continually sent memoranda to Williams requesting that the MAAG orient its training program toward counter-guerrilla tactics.<sup>112</sup> Williams believed that the GVN's difficulty lay not in the type of training, but in not training at all. In a response to Tran Trung Dung, Assistant Secretary of National Defense of the Republic of Vietnam, he attributed the ARVN's poor performance to not preparing its soldiers for war: "In too many cases little or no worthwhile training of any

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<sup>111</sup>Department of the Army, *Reflections on the Vietnam War* by Cao Van Vien and Dong Van Khuyen, Indochina Monographs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1978), 10. (Part 1, reel 2, *U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam, 1954-1975*).

<sup>112</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, vol. I, *Vietnam*, 398-399.

kind is being done. . . . Typical demands cited [for not training] are for security operations, guard, housing construction, and ceremonies.”<sup>113</sup>

Williams’ response illustrates the dichotomy between the Army’s doctrine and the war the Army was preparing the ARVN to fight. A conventional soldier, Williams expected the ARVN to defeat the PLAF in the field militarily. By intimating that “security operations, guard, [and] housing construction” was detracting from the ARVN’s overall effectiveness, he demonstrated his complete disregard for the importance of civic action among the people. Although entirely correct in embracing the tenet that a disciplined and well trained army is imperative, the CHMAAG continued to misplace his emphasis on training the ARVN for a completely conventional war. Even a traditional soldier like General Maxwell D. Taylor observed in his report of 3 November 1961 that “[i]t is our clear impression that, by and large, training and equipment of the Vietnamese Armed Forces are still too heavily weighted toward conventional military operations.”<sup>114</sup>

Yet there were those Americans who believed, as did Ambassador Durbrow, that the GVN needed a comprehensive counter-insurgency plan. Roger Hilsman, in January 1962, submitted to the president a paper entitled “A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam.” Essentially a paraphrased version of the recommendations of Sir Robert Thompson, a British counterinsurgency expert who had played a key role in defeating

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 372.

<sup>114</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. I, *Vietnam, 1961*, 497-498.

the Malayan insurgency, it met with a warm reception.<sup>115</sup> Conceptually, the plan revolved around pacification, or denying the NLF/PLAF access to the people. By establishing government control in the villages, and denying access to the enemy, the plan sought to reestablish GVN control and legitimacy in the rural areas.

Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother, was the program's champion and "was the real driving force behind the GVN's uneven but discernible movement toward adoption of the strategic hamlet."<sup>116</sup> Mirroring a similar program used by the British in Malaya in the 1950s, the hamlets concentrated the people in fortified and defended villages.<sup>117</sup> This type of village defense was not new to Vietnam:

The strategic hamlet concept itself, however, was not necessarily an adaptation of British strategy in Malaysia despite apparent similarities. This concept had antecedents in Vietnamese history which dated back to the period of Chinese domination, but the most striking and recent precedent was perhaps the "combat village" defense system established [by the Viet Minh] during the 1946-1954 war of resistance against the French.<sup>118</sup>

Comprised of an inner fence of bamboo spikes and thorn bushes; a moat with sloped, mined sides; an outer barrier of barbed wire; and cement or brick watchtowers, the strategic hamlet sought to protect the villagers from the PLAF and to establish social programs for their benefit.<sup>119</sup> In reality, the villages were for control, not pacification.

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<sup>115</sup>Office of the Secretary of Defense, "The Strategic Hamlet Program," in *United States-Vietnamese Relations, 1945-1967*, Book 3, Part IVB, Section 2, 14. (Folder 6, box 1, unit 2, DPC).

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>117</sup>Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 81.

<sup>118</sup>Department of the Army, *Reflections on the Vietnam War*, 19.

<sup>119</sup>Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam*, 315.

The people resented building new homes with no compensation and being herded into the fortified stockades every evening.<sup>120</sup> Further, many farmers now had to walk a significant distance to their fields.

Although successful at first, the program rapidly spiraled downward. Province chiefs, vying for Diem's favor, eagerly constructed more strategic hamlets with the peasants' labor and "secured" more people. By forcing the people to live in hamlets and not funding the promised social benefits, the province chiefs created increasing numbers of potential PLAF members. Fostered by overeager American advisors with a penchant for statistics, the province chiefs continued to herd the people into hamlets, causing the program to collapse under its own weight.<sup>121</sup> Summarizing the strategic hamlet program, Generals Vien and Khuyen state: "The end result was that instead of voluntary participation, a primordial condition for this national policy to achieve success, the strategic hamlet people found themselves living in a state of represeed [sic] feelings, suspicion, and frustration."<sup>122</sup>

While influenced by the MAAG's firm belief in conventional warfare, by 1962 the GVN's strategy included a combination of conventional and unconventional warfare. Tactically, the ARVN relied on two general types of operations: the sweep and the sweep and hold. First used in 1959 against the PLAF, the sweep, also called "mopping-

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<sup>120</sup>Lewy, 25.

<sup>121</sup>Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 35.

<sup>122</sup>Department of the Army, *Reflections on the Vietnam War*, 21.

up operations" consisted primarily of daylight patrolling through the contested countryside.<sup>123</sup> Leaving soon after daylight, ARVN units conducted roadmarches through the villages, looking for PLAF guerrillas. As night approached, they returned to their encampments, leaving the villages open to PLAF influence.<sup>124</sup> With the ARVN approaching on foot, the PLAF, with ample warning, frequently eluded its enemies. As Roger Hilsman observed in late 1962 to Secretary of State Rusk, "Tactically, the operating units on patrol tend to gain the impression that they are in enemy territory and they act accordingly."<sup>125</sup> The arrival of American air assets in 1961 and the increased mobility they offered initially boosted the effectiveness of the sweep, but the PLAF developed methods to counter the helicopters.

The real victims of the sweeps were the villagers. Although they suffered at the hands of both sides, the people frequently bore the brunt of "mischievous acts" committed by the ARVN. As one village elder lamented: "We fear Saigon troops more than we fear provincial troops. They seem to create havoc wherever they go."<sup>126</sup> As

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>124</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. III, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 9. For a narrative of a typical sweep, see Halberstam, 89 and *passim*.

<sup>125</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. I, *Vietnam, 1961*, 624.

<sup>126</sup>Department of the Army, *Reflections on the Vietnam War*, 32.

Generals Vien and Khuyen comment: "Rarely, if ever, was the problem of winning the people's hearts and minds taken into serious consideration."<sup>127</sup>

A second tactic, the sweep and hold, sought to reduce the nighttime control of the PLAF in the villages. Recognizing that the sweeps did little to break the PLAF's hold on the villages, the GVN sought to combine military with political activity. Initially conducting a sweep, the ARVN cleared the PLAF out of a region or area. The GVN then implemented the "hold" portion, consisting of establishing local officials and strategic hamlets.<sup>128</sup> Conceptually more sound than the sweep alone, the sweep and hold also suffered from its inability to initially destroy the PLAF or prevent the guerrillas from infiltrating the hamlets during the sweep phase of the operation.

As combat with the PLAF became more intense in the early 1960s, the ARVN came to rely heavily on field artillery and fighter-bomber preparations before launching any attacks.<sup>129</sup> Rather than close with the enemy to engage in hand to hand combat, the ARVN preferred to stand off and pummel its opponents with rockets and artillery rounds just as its American advisors had fought the conventional Chinese forces in Korea. This reliance on firepower, while allowing the commander to reduce "friendly" casualties, worked to the ARVN's disadvantage. Not only was the PLAF able to counter this massive firepower, but serious collateral damage resulted from its indiscriminate use.

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<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>128</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. III, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 9.

<sup>129</sup>Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York: Random House, 1988), 107.

Vietnamese civilians suffered horribly, resulting in a populace extremely unfriendly toward the GVN.

Not only did the MAAG struggle to develop a strategy in Vietnam that followed American doctrine, but it also fought to organize the ARVN into an army that could conduct it successfully. Championed by General Williams to bring the ARVN in line with FM 100-5, the ARVN's reorganization in September 1959 established the general framework that was in place during Ap Bac. Diem, as president, held the position of Commander in Chief of the RVNAF. He also maintained the portfolio for the Secretary of State for National Defense, effectively combining the two positions. The Chief of the Joint General Staff, answering to Diem, was the senior military commander of the RVNAF. Within his staff was the ARVN commander, who also acted as the Assistant Chief of Staff, Army.<sup>130</sup> The Joint General Staff maintained five staff sections: J1, personnel; J2, intelligence; J3, operations; J4, logistics; and J5, civil operations.<sup>131</sup>

With the reorganization, the ARVN now fielded three corps headquarters, with a fourth added 14 December 1962, and seven infantry divisions. Authorized 10,450 soldiers each, the divisions in 1959 consisted of three infantry regiments, an artillery regiment, a mortar battalion, an engineer battalion, and various support companies.<sup>132</sup> Within the corps regions were divisional tactical zones, whose boundaries were generally

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<sup>130</sup>Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam*, 476.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 478.

<sup>132</sup>Department of the Army, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, 9.

superimposed upon the existing civil provinces. The province chiefs, charged by law to provide security for their provinces, were often ARVN officers. Although military officers, the province chiefs were responsible to the Department of the Interior, not the Department of Defense. Thus, although province chiefs might be junior to other ARVN commanders operating in their provinces, they were not subject to ARVN orders and could deploy the Civil Guard (CG) units as they saw fit.<sup>133</sup>

The province chiefs' independence of ARVN command was the bane of the MAAG, which stressed unity of action between the ARVN and CG, and even came to the attention of Maxwell Taylor. On numerous occasions, the province chiefs failed to deploy their units to support ARVN operations in their provinces, thus depriving the ARVN commanders of unity of command. The ARVN tactics for fighting the guerrillas were cumbersome enough, but the ARVN's inability to concentrate forces rapidly because of a divided command structure only exacerbated the problem. In his report to the president in 1961, Taylor recommended that "the U.S. government insist that a single inviolate chain of command be established and practiced. This must include removal of Province Chiefs from the [Civil Guard] chain of command."<sup>134</sup>

Reflecting the differences between conventional and internal security operations, ARVN units were of three types: the regular army (ARVN), the Civil Guard or *Bao An*,

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<sup>133</sup>Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam*, 478; Lieutenant Colonel John Vann, briefing notes, n.d., 2. (Folder 3, box 39, Vann-Sheehan Vietnam War Collection, Library of Congress Manuscript Division [hereafter VSVWC]).

<sup>134</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. I, *Vietnam, 1961*, 504.

and the Self Defense Corps or *Dan Ve* (SDC). These three branches reflected the Vietnamese tradition of dividing the army into main force units, regional units, and local units. As described above, ARVN units focused on destroying the enemy's forces through conventional strategy and tactics. The CG and SDC were products of Diem's desire to maintain stability in the countryside. On 5 May 1955, Diem established the CG by presidential decree to provide internal security. The CG remained a completely presidential asset until 1958, when the Department of the Interior took over administrative and technical support to reduce the burden on the presidency.<sup>135</sup>

Much to the relief of General McGarr, the CHMAAG, who strove to achieve unity of effort between the ARVN, the CG, and the SDC, the CG finally became a Department of National Defense asset in 1960.<sup>136</sup> Charged with enforcing the law and maintaining public order and security in the rural areas, the uniformed and lightly armed CG fell under the command of the province chief. The CG's primary focus was to conduct counter-insurgency operations and collect information, participate in civic action programs, and foster the population's confidence in the GVN. Organized into 160 man companies comprised of four platoons and a headquarters section, the CG usually assigned platoons to guard posts along key routes.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup>Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam*, 274.

<sup>136</sup>Office of the Secretary of Defense, "U.S. Military Advisory Effort," in *United States-Vietnamese Relations, 1945-1967*, Book 3, Part IVB, Section 3, 9. (Folder 6, box 1, unit 2, DPC).

<sup>137</sup>Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam*, 274.

The SDC, established in 1956, assisted regular security forces to maintain public order and security at the village and hamlet level. Originally a Department of the Interior asset, the SDC was transferred to the Department of National Defense in October 1961. More concerned with static defense, the SDC was not uniformed and lightly armed. Consisting of three platoon companies, the SDC could apprehend suspected PLAF guerrillas but had to surrender them to the CG for action.<sup>138</sup>

In line with U.S. Army doctrine, the basic unit of employment for the ARVN was the squad, usually consisting of nine to eleven men. Maintaining a triangular configuration, typical of conventional warfare, three squads comprised a platoon, and three platoons a company. Originally, four rifle companies plus a headquarters company rounded out a battalion, but, after Diem established ranger companies in 1959, this number dropped to three.<sup>139</sup> Three battalions formed a regiment, but, by April 1961, although a division was still authorized its 1959 strength of 10,450, its artillery consisted of only an artillery battalion and a mortar battalion. The ARVN also still fielded seven divisions, the 1st, 2d, 5th, 7th, 21st, 22d, and 23d, but it also gained an airborne brigade

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<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 275.

<sup>139</sup>Department of the Army, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, 17.

of five battalions.<sup>140</sup> In essence, the ARVN was “a nifty miniature copy of the U.S. military establishment.”<sup>141</sup>

As 1961 wore on, the U.S. realized that the ARVN needed increased mobility to counter the PLAF’s advantages in the villages and authorized the shipment of two helicopter companies to Vietnam. On 11 December 1961, the USNS *Card*, carrying 32 H-21s of the 8th and 57th Transportation Companies (Light Helicopter), introduced the first American helicopters to Vietnam.<sup>142</sup> Officially nicknamed the “Shawnee,” the H-21 was a dual rotor helicopter with an angular fuselage, lending itself to the derisive moniker “The Flying Banana.” With a relatively slow cruising speed of 101 miles per hour, the H-21 could carry 20 passengers, plus crew.<sup>143</sup> Aging, the H-21s were plagued by mechanical problems but were relatively durable and the best the U.S. could offer at the time. As one pilot phrased it, the aircraft was “an accident looking for a place to happen.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup>United States Military Assistance Advisory Group, “ARVN Order of Battle Report, April 1961,” NLK 81-197. (Folder 8, box 1, unit 2, DPC).

<sup>141</sup>Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 17.

<sup>142</sup>Department of the Army, *Airmobility, 1961-1971* by John Tolson, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973), 3.

<sup>143</sup>Barry Gregory, *Vietnam Helicopter Handbook* (San Bernadino, CA: The Bargo Press, 1988), 144.

<sup>144</sup>Halberstam, 84.

Soon after the deployment of the H-21s, the U.S. introduced another weapon to assist the ARVN: the M113 armored personnel carrier (APC). Organizing two M113 companies in April 1962, the ARVN assigned them to the 7th and 21st Divisions. Originally called mechanized rifle companies, they fielded fifteen M113s organized into three platoons of three APCs, a support platoon of four APCs, and a headquarters section of two APCs. Boasting fifteen .50 caliber and eighteen .30 caliber machine guns, these companies brought heavy firepower and maneuverability to the battlefield.<sup>145</sup> With their amphibious capability, the APCs could cross the rice paddies with ease, but they were limited by their inability to cross the canals which bounded the paddies, especially in the rich rice areas of the Mekong Delta.

As the PLAF developed tactics to counter the H-21s, helicopter losses mounted. Attempting to maintain ARVN mobility and protect the five H-21 companies that were now in Vietnam (8th, 33d, 57th, 81st, and 93d Transportation Companies), the U.S. deployed in early 1962 the Utility Tactical Transport Helicopter Company (UTTHC), the Army's first gunship company, with fifteen UH-1As.<sup>146</sup> Its prototype flying only six years earlier, the UH-1A was armed with sixteen 2.75" rockets and two .30 caliber machine guns. The "Iroquois," or "Huey" as it was commonly called, provided protection for the slow and poorly armed H-21s.<sup>147</sup> Although maintaining that it did not

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<sup>145</sup>Department of the Army, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 21-22.

<sup>146</sup>Department of the Army, *Tactical and Materiel Innovations* by John Hay, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), 14-16; Gregory, 55, 148; Department of the Army, *Airmobility*, 28.

<sup>147</sup>Gregory, 55; Department of the Army, *Tactical and Material Innovations*, 16.

have combat forces in Vietnam, the United States subtly changed its role by introducing the UTTHC, technically a combat force by today's doctrine.

Throughout the fall of 1962, the gunships successfully suppressed the PLAF at landing zone after landing zone. Continuing to hone its airmobile capabilities, the U.S. Army introduced to Vietnam in late 1962 eleven UH-1Bs, an improved version of the Huey. First tested in November 1960 and rushed into production, the UH-1Bs were armed with sixteen 2.75" rockets and four 7.62mm M60 machine guns.<sup>148</sup> As the American presence in Vietnam increased, so did the GVN's capabilities. By the end of 1962, the CG fielded 77,000 soldiers; the SDC, 99,500; and the ARVN, 218,000 with six American helicopter companies in support of its operations against the PLAF.<sup>149</sup>

Despite the ARVN's increase in size and quality of equipment, its effectiveness remained questionable. Among the greatest hindrances to its efficacy was its poor leadership. Burdened by its political nature under Diem, the ARVN's leadership not only had to worry about success in the field but also the political climate of the GVN. Diem's influence over the ARVN and his ability to ensure that loyal subordinates occupied key positions were clear from General Nguyen Van Hinh's dismissal as chief of staff in 1954. Favoring Central Vietnamese who were Roman Catholic, Diem played a personal role in the appointment of most senior commanders and staff officers:

[T]he authority to promote company grade officers rested with the Minister of Defense [the portfolio of which Diem maintained]. The promotion of field grade and general officers was the sole prerogative of the President. . . . The

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<sup>148</sup>Department of the Army, *Airmobility*, 28, 30.

<sup>149</sup>Office of the Secretary of Defense, "U.S. Military Advisory Effort," 132.

rumor circulated among military officers that the decisive factors were the three Ds, the Vietnamese initials for Party, Religion, and Region. An officer had to possess one of these three qualifications for promotion or a good position. . . . Promotion was restricted, hard to obtain, and highly opportunistic; it often did not bear any relation to military needs.<sup>150</sup>

His brother, Nhu, also exerted his influence on the ARVN through Diem.

An example of this influence and maneuvering by the Ngo Dinh clan concerned General Doung Van Minh. At a rally to celebrate a GVN victory, an orator pronounced Minh as the "Hero of the Nation." The Ngo Dinh, feeling slighted at this elevation of Minh, immediately organized the Army Field Command and appointed Minh as commander. This new organization commanded no units, acting strictly as an inspectorate for the I and II Corps. In essence, Diem had pigeon-holed Minh for being successful.<sup>151</sup> As General Huynh Van Cao, a Diem appointee to the newly formed IV Corps, observed: "It does not pay to be too successful, for you then become a threat."<sup>152</sup> Even the Army's *Area Handbook for Vietnam* acknowledges Diem's centralized control:

President Ngo's [sic] exercise of personal power and reluctance to delegate authority beyond a small circle of relatives and close friends . . . deny the government the services of some able men . . . [and] tend to convert constructive opposition into hostility.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup>Sheehan, 77; Department of the Army, *The RVNAF* by Dong Van Khuyen, Indochina Monographs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1978), 86. (Part 1, reel 3, *U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam, 1954-1975*).

<sup>151</sup>Tran Van Don, 78.

<sup>152</sup>Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 42.

<sup>153</sup>Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam*, 312.

Lack of combat experience among the leadership was also a grave liability.

Leaders were unable to gain experience for a number of reasons. First, there was little martial experience among the officers from which to draw. The French, at all levels, officered the VNA; with the rapid expansion of the VNA, and later the ARVN, officer training simply could not keep up with the units' requirements. Junior leaders with no combat experience were promoted to higher command and staff positions just to fill a new unit, further exacerbating the problem. Second, staff officers received the majority of promotions, discouraging the better officers from serving in combat units.<sup>154</sup>

Third, the GVN valued officer loyalty over proficiency. Although it is difficult to assess their effects on later ARVN officer actions, the coup attempts against Diem in 1960 and 1962 demonstrated the precarious position of the Vietnamese political leadership.<sup>155</sup> As a result, the ARVN rotated commanders regularly to prevent camaraderie and formation of cliques that might lead to possible future coup attempts.<sup>156</sup> An officer's experience gained in a particular position, therefore, was lost from the unit upon his rotation. Finally, since the better combat leaders exposed themselves and took more risks, their casualty rate was high, and they could not be replaced. As General J.

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<sup>154</sup>Lewy, 170-171.

<sup>155</sup>James R. Reckner, Ph.D., Texas Tech University, suggested the linkage between officer rotations and the memory of the 1960 coup attempt.

<sup>156</sup>Lewy, 19.

Lawton Collins observed: “[C]ombat operations often eliminated the best commanders.”<sup>157</sup>

Another deficiency among the ARVN’s officers was their inability to lead their men. A portion of this difficulty resulted from the traditions the ARVN officers inherited from their earlier experiences with the French. The French system of command embraced a vastly different set of precepts from that of the American advisors. Vietnamese officers, while under French tutelage, learned such precepts as:

“A 2d lieutenant knows nothing, and does nothing  
A 1st lieutenant knows nothing, but does everything  
A captain knows everything, but does nothing” . . .  
or . . .  
“A leader does not have to do anything, lets nothing disturb him, and makes others work” . . .  
or even . . .  
“Do what I say but not what I do”<sup>158</sup>

While cynical, these precepts were never offered as teachings, yet for the “unsophisticated Vietnamese officers who looked up to their French commanders as tutors, these phrases might have been construed as wisdom.”<sup>159</sup>

Many ARVN leaders received their positions as a function of political loyalty, family connections, or level of formal education, not as a function of demonstrated military ability or potential, fostering what Roger Hilsman calls “inefficient, cowardly

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<sup>157</sup>Ibid., 171.

<sup>158</sup>Department of the Army, *Leadership* by Cao Van Vien, Indochina Monographs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1978), 15. (Part 1, reel 4, *U.S. Armed Forces in Vietnam, 1954-1975*).

<sup>159</sup>Ibid.

leadership.”<sup>160</sup> General Huynh Van Cao illustrates this type of political officer.

Appointed the 7th ARVN Division commander and, later, the IV Corps commander, Cao lacked the skills required of a combat leader:

Competence had...little to do with his [Cao's] double-time promotions and the fact that he held command of the 7th Division. . . . He had been appointed division commander because he was a Central Vietnamese and a Roman Catholic . . . [whose] family had been known to the Ngo Dinh, the president's family.<sup>161</sup>

The officers' lack of ability hampered their effectiveness because the soldiers, realizing their chances of surviving combat were lessened, often refused to follow orders.

Further, most ARVN officers were from the middle and upper classes, while the soldiers were from the lower strata of society.<sup>162</sup> This inability to relate to soldiers of a lower social class, which David Halberstam calls the “mandarin legacy,” only exacerbated the ARVN officers’ problems in attempting to influence their men. To many ARVN officers, the whole point of achieving rank was *not* to go to the field, a privilege many saw resulted from promotion. Rather than viewing a promotion as an opportunity to lead and inspire larger units of soldiers, many sought it as a way to separate themselves from the burdens of combat, further widening the gap between the officers and their men.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup>Hilsman, 446-447.

<sup>161</sup>Sheehan, 76-77.

<sup>162</sup>Lewy, 170.

<sup>163</sup>Halberstam, 165.

The ARVN's morale and motivation during the war varied. In some instances, ARVN units were highly trained, disciplined, and motivated. In many units, motivation was lacking among the officers and soldiers. The soldiers' reasons for fighting contributed to this lack of motivation. While some volunteered out of a personal tragedy suffered at the hands of the PAVN or PLAF, most fought because they had been drafted. Throughout the war, even better trained and equipped ARVN units repeatedly manifested an unwillingness to engage the enemy in sustained combat.<sup>164</sup>

One facet of this reluctance to engage the enemy stemmed from the poor medical attention wounded ARVN soldiers received. With a rudimentary medical evacuation (medevac) and treatment system, the ARVN was unable to provide its soldiers with quality health care. Since the Vietnamese Air Force had few rotary wing aircraft, Vietnamese soldiers could not expect aero-medevac unless an American advisor was nearby, and the wounded ARVN soldiers could get to the pickup zone (PZ).<sup>165</sup> Upon becoming a casualty, a soldier expects and deserves decent medical treatment; when he does not receive it, and he does not firmly believe in the cause for which he fights, he avoids heavy combat to preserve himself. Understandably, the poor prospects of surviving heavy combat weighed upon the ARVN soldiers and dampened their fervor.

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<sup>164</sup>George Herring, *America's Longest War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 233; Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. III, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 8.

<sup>165</sup>Lewy, 173; James R. Reckner, Ph.D., Texas Tech University, suggested the unavailability of aero-medevac.

Family considerations only made matters worse for the ARVN. Organized by geographical region, ARVN units suffered heavy desertion rates when they deployed away from the soldiers' home areas.<sup>166</sup> The pull of family was stronger than that exerted by the GVN. The GVN only worsened its plight by never systematically returning or prosecuting deserters. In essence, the GVN tacitly acknowledged a soldier's right to desert. This fostered many ARVN soldiers' lack of belief in the GVN's legitimacy.<sup>167</sup> Organized along conventional lines and well equipped, but suffering from poor leadership and reservations about their government, the ARVN soldier approached 1963 with something significantly less than a whole-hearted enthusiasm for defeating the PLAF.

#### The People's Liberation Armed Forces' Doctrine, Strategies, Tactics, and Organization

The PLAF's strategy and tactics better addressed the nature of the conflict in South Vietnam. The insurgents' strategy revolved around the concept of *dau tranh* (struggle).<sup>168</sup> An extremely emotional term for Vietnamese, *dau tranh* formed the basis of all Vietnamese revolutionary thought. Stated one PAVN defector: "*Dau tranh* is all important to a revolutionary. It shapes his thinking. . . . [H]is whole world is *dau*

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<sup>166</sup>Bruce Palmer, *The 25 Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1984), 104.

<sup>167</sup>Lewy, 177.

<sup>168</sup>Pike, *Viet Cong*, 85.

*tranh*.<sup>169</sup> *Dau tranh* had two components: *dau tranh chinh tri* (political *dau tranh*) and *dau tranh vu trang* (armed *dau tranh*).<sup>170</sup> These two components were intertwined and complementary. A master at coordinating *dau tranh*'s two components, Vo Nguyen Giap writes: "The military and political struggles are closely coordinated, assist each other, and encourage each other to develop"<sup>171</sup> Like ice tongs, the two arms of *dau tranh* gripped the enemy from both the political and military sides.<sup>172</sup>

Within political *dau tranh* (what Douglas Pike terms "politics with guns"), there were three *van* (action) programs: *dich van* (action among the enemy) or non-military activities among the population controlled by the enemy, *dan van* (action among the people) or administration and other activities in the "liberated area," and *binh van* (action among the military) or non-military action among the enemy's troops.<sup>173</sup> Each *van* targeted a different group and ensured all were subject to political struggle.

The objectives of armed *dau tranh*, according to Vo Nguyen Giap, were "to destroy the enemy military force, to defend the people, to attract the people's sympathy, to coordinate with the political struggle, and to serve and help the political struggle score

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<sup>169</sup>Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), 217.

<sup>170</sup>Pike, *Viet Cong*, 85.

<sup>171</sup>Vo Nguyen Giap, *Big Victory, Great Task* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 52.

<sup>172</sup>Pike, *PAVN*, 233.

<sup>173</sup>Ibid., 216; Pike, *Viet Cong*, 86.

the greatest victories for the resistance.”<sup>174</sup> During the First Indochina War, the PAVN perfected the strategy of protracted conflict paired with guerrilla tactics. Protracted conflict, or long term war, sought to counter a larger enemy’s strength by wearing down his resolve. At the same time, the insurgents built strength by involving the people in the struggle. In protracted conflict, time was on the side of the insurgent. The longer the struggle, the more time the insurgents had to build strength, and the more time the enemy had to tire of the fight.<sup>175</sup>

Guerrilla tactics followed three stages: stage of contention, stage of equilibrium, and stage of counteroffensive.<sup>176</sup> The first two phases allowed the insurgents to build their strength. They played to the strengths of the insurgents and the weaknesses of the enemy. Guerrillas found security in dispersal; the enemy had to concentrate his forces, thus inviting attack. Guerrillas lived with the people and exerted influence daily; the enemy only exerted influence as he passed through the villages. Guerrillas gained logistical support from the people; the enemy resupplied itself from logistical bases, tempting attack on his lines of communication.<sup>177</sup> As the insurgents gained power, they shifted to mobile warfare, or the counteroffensive stage. As defined by Giap,

[m]obile warfare is the fighting way of concentrating troops, of the regular army in which relatively big forces are regrouped and operating on a relatively vast battlefield, attacking the enemy where he is relatively exposed

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<sup>174</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, *Big Victory, Great Task*, 54.

<sup>175</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, 46.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 104.

with a view to annihilating enemy manpower, advancing very deeply then withdrawing very swiftly.<sup>178</sup>

Mobile warfare was not an end unto itself. Quite to the contrary, it relied on guerrilla tactics to wear down and destroy the enemy's reserves. Put simply, the two were inseparable.<sup>179</sup>

Tactically, the PLAF sought to lessen the effects of the enemy's massed firepower. To neutralize the enemy's advantage, the PLAF closed with the enemy forces any time it wanted to maintain contact. By intermingling with the enemy, the PLAF knew that the enemy, fearing fratricide, could not call for close air support (CAS) or field or rocket artillery. If the PLAF wished to avoid contact and the fire support that went with it, the guerrillas broke contact and melted into the jungle. Properly employed, the "bear hug"/break contact tactics prevented unnecessary PLAF casualties.<sup>180</sup>

The PLAF generally relied on two specific tactics when initiating contact with the ARVN: the ambush and the raid. Usually employing either an "L" shaped or a "V" shaped ambush, the PLAF sought through this tactic to acquire weapons, harass and demoralize the ARVN, delay or block reinforcing troops or supplies, destroy or capture

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<sup>178</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>179</sup>Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>180</sup>David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *Portrait of the Enemy* (London: I. B. Taurus & Company, 1987), 108.

enemy troops, or undermine the enemy's confidence.<sup>181</sup> Maintaining the element of surprise, the PLAF regularly inflicted casualties on the poorly trained ARVN patrols.

When targeting outposts or fixed positions, the PLAF employed the raid to destroy or damage equipment or supplies, capture enemy or inflict casualties, or harass and demoralize the enemy.<sup>182</sup> Also called sapper operations, the PLAF's raids often were devastating, as witnessed by the 32d Infantry Regiment in 1960. Prior to a raid, the cadres sent out extensive reconnaissance patrols to determine the locations of enemy positions, the strengths and weaknesses of his defenses, and the routes to and from the objective. After digesting this information and developing a plan, the cadres constructed a sandtable, a scale, three dimensional model of the terrain, and conducted a thorough backbrief, or talk-through, before the attack. If time permitted, the sappers constructed actual mock-ups of the enemy's positions and rehearsed on them.

After each man thoroughly understood his role, the sappers began their infiltrations just after dark, capitalizing on the ARVN's usual reduction of security at sunset. Sappers emphasized camouflage, sometimes taking three hours to prepare themselves. Stripped to only shorts, weapons, and explosives, the sappers crawled through the enemy wire. If a sapper needed to cut a wire, he only cut 2/3 of the way through it. After wrapping the wire in cloth, he then broke it by hand to reduce the

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<sup>181</sup>Department of the Army, *Human Factors Considerations of Undergrounds in Insurgencies* by Andrew Molnar, Pamphlet 550-104 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 213-216.

<sup>182</sup>Ibid., 218.

amount of noise produced.<sup>183</sup> Once through the wire, each sapper proceeded to his assigned objective. Destroying the crew served weapons first to reduce the enemy's defenses, the sappers then either planted their explosives or tossed their satchel charges to destroy other objectives. Once a sapper had completed his assigned mission, he returned through his breach to a rally point outside the wire.<sup>184</sup>

With the ARVN's increased use of APCs and helicopters in mid-1962, the PLAF began to develop tactics to reduce these technological advantages. Called "counter mopping-up operations," these tactics sought to capitalize on the perceived weaknesses of the ARVN. First used with success in fall 1962, these tactics involved employing sound defensive and improved anti-aircraft techniques:

Defensive works were consolidated, and camouflage discipline strictly observed. Guards were positioned around our quarters to detect enemy surprise attacks. AAA [anti-aircraft artillery] cells were activated and trained in the proper techniques to down enemy aircraft and helicopters. Our units were notified of the weaknesses of amphibious M113's. Proper firing and combat techniques as well as camouflage of fortified works were taught to units.<sup>185</sup>

The PLAF conducted "successful" counter mopping-up operations in Cai Nai and Phu Phong on 13 September, Vinh Kim on 23 September, and My Hanh Dong (reported as

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<sup>183</sup>Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, 162-163.

<sup>184</sup>Ibid., 161-166.

<sup>185</sup>United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, *Ap Bac Battle, 2 January 1963; Translation of VC Document, 20 April 1963*, C0043021, 4 (hereafter *Ap Bac*). (The Vietnam Archive).

Ap My Luong by American sources) on 5 October.<sup>186</sup> Although the PLAF initiated contact in each instance, it broke contact soon thereafter. By January 1963, these counter mopping-up operations involved remaining in contact with the ARVN for longer periods of time.

One PLAF tactic essential to all units was *vu trang tuyen truyen*, or armed propaganda. Not a new tactic, armed propaganda was one that has been present throughout Vietnamese history. The PAVN perfected armed propaganda's modern form during the First Indochina War.<sup>187</sup> Put simply, armed propaganda was a political-military tactic used to integrate armed action with the political ideal. Although a program of violence was an integral part of this tactic, terror was not its sole basis. It was the daily interaction with the people to reinforce continually their indoctrination that was critical. As a Viet Minh manual prescribed in 1945, “[p]ropaganda teams must work hard. Sometimes they must help our people in their work or work their way into a crowd of people who are harvesting or transplanting in the fields to propagandise them.”<sup>188</sup> This combination of physical presence, indoctrination, and actual or implied violence against government supporters was extremely effective. As a villager told an ARVN commander in 1962:

You came here with artillery, trucks, and well-equipped soldiers to fight against our own people. . . . You blame us for giving the NLF soldiers rice, but you must remember that they are living here with us,

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<sup>186</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>187</sup>Lockhart, 92.

<sup>188</sup>Ibid., 94.

sharing our poor lot and protecting us [from ARVN misconduct]. They are our own children and brothers and belong to our village.<sup>189</sup>

Just as the ARVN followed American doctrine to organize, the PLAF looked to the doctrine of protracted conflict for answers. Fighting a conflict similar to the First Indochina War, the PLAF's organization resembled the Viet Minh's, although the clandestine nature of the PLAF and its organization defy precise description.<sup>190</sup> The PLAF maintained the same general organization from its inception and organized itself into main force and paramilitary units like the ARVN. The *Than Phan Quan Su* (regular military forces) were divided into two sections, the *Quan Doi Chu Luc* (main force) and the *Bo Doi Dia Phuong* (regional force).<sup>191</sup> The three man cell was the basic unit of the *Than Phan Quan Su*. The PLAF organized these cells into squads and platoons. Platoons formed companies, some of which were independent units that reported to the NLF district, while others were organic to battalions. Battalions were also of two types: the *tieu doan co dong* (independent battalion) and the *tieu doan tap trung* (concentrated battalion). The *tieu doan tap trung* comprised *trung doan* (regiments), which formed divisions, the largest PLAF units organized.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup>Tran Van Don, 82.

<sup>190</sup>Douglas Pike, The Vietnam Center, interview by author, 5 September 1997, Lubbock, TX, The Vietnam Center, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

<sup>191</sup>Pike, *Viet Cong*, 236-237.

<sup>192</sup>Ibid., 237; Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 67.

The paramilitary branch of the PLAF was the *Dan Quan Du Kich* (Guerrilla Popular Army). The PLAF further divided the *Dan Quan Du Kich* into three sections: the *Du Kich Chien Dau* (combat guerrillas), the *Du Kich Xa* (village guerrillas), and the *Tu Va Nhan Dan* (self-defense militia).<sup>193</sup> The *du kich* was the PLAF's full time presence in the hamlet and village. Poorly armed, the *du kich*'s focus was on psychologically influencing the people, not military action. The *du kich* also formed a manpower pool for the main force units.<sup>194</sup> The basic *du kich* element was the three man *du kich bi mat* (secret guerrilla cell). Depending upon the population of the hamlet or village, the PLAF organized the *du kich bi mat* into squads and platoons, which peaked at 36 to 48 men, although some reportedly reached sizes of 100.<sup>195</sup>

Historians have not yet systematically studied the PLAF leadership. The Rand Corporation interviewed many lower level PLAF officers during the war, but these interviews are almost indigestible in nature.<sup>196</sup> One may make some observations. Given their experiences gained during World War II and the First Indochina War, the PLAF officers who remained in the South certainly were not new to insurgency warfare. This knowledge served as the basis for their competence in executing tactical missions during the Second Indochina War. Because the Party maintained a presence at almost every

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<sup>193</sup>William Andrews, *The Village War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 105.

<sup>194</sup>Pike, *Viet Cong*, 234-235.

<sup>195</sup>Ibid., 234-235; Andrews, 105.

<sup>196</sup>Pike, *PAVN*, 191.

level of command (i.e., the political officer), the PLAF did not have to rotate its officers for fear of coups or cliques like the ARVN. By staying in the same position for lengthy periods of time, the officers honed their skills, not having to learn new ones continually.

A PLAF soldier joined for various reasons. Some became guerrillas because of coercion, while others had a desire to avenge personal loss or to gain a better life. The NLF terror in the villages and hamlets was an effective means of recruiting, but sometimes it did not have the desired effect. In one instance, the PLAF assassinated a local official, spurring five village members to join. At the same time, five other men joined the ARVN, effectively nullifying the NLF's gain.<sup>197</sup> Many PLAF soldiers joined to avenge mistreatment at the hands of the GVN.

For many PLAF soldiers, joining the struggle offered an opportunity for a better life. Not concerned with ideological concepts, numerous recruits wanted only to own the land that their families had farmed for generations. As one PLAF senior captain, who had been a tenant farmer and had suffered at the hands of his landowner, stated:

We had to get rid of the regime that allowed a few people to use their money and authority to oppress the others.

So I joined the Liberation Front. I followed the VC to fight for freedom and prosperity for the country. I felt that this was right.<sup>198</sup>

Focusing on the possibility of a better life, most PLAF indoctrination emphasized

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<sup>197</sup> Andrews, 58.

<sup>198</sup> Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, 42-43.

patriotic themes and the expulsion of the Americans without touching on Marxist doctrine.<sup>199</sup>

The PLAF possessed a valuable asset to maintain the guerrillas' motivation: the *chinh tri vien* (commissar or political officer).<sup>200</sup> A Party member, the commissar was present at every command level, down to company, similar to the Soviet Red Army and Chinese People's Liberation Army. In essence, the commissar "mobilized the spirit." He conducted political indoctrination, solved personal problems, and generally attended to the unit's morale.<sup>201</sup> An editorial in *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (*People's Army*) outlined the duties of the political officer in October 1962:

The role of the political commissar has been very clearly defined: They are responsible for the political attitude of their companies, they must look after the intellectual training of the servicemen and continuously help them to develop their thinking habits.<sup>202</sup>

Responsible to the Party for his unit, the political officer ensured unit cohesion and morale.

The PLAF also conducted extensive indoctrination of its soldiers to stiffen their resolve. As noted above, the concept of *dau tranh* permeated the soldiers' views of

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<sup>199</sup>Truong Nhu Tang et al., 164.

<sup>200</sup>Department of the Army, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam: A Study of Organization and Strategy* by Michael Conley, Pamphlet 550-106 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 150.

<sup>201</sup>Pike, *PAVN*, 164.

<sup>202</sup>Department of the Army, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam*, 140.

themselves. This almost mythical concept provided purpose to their existence. Indoctrination reinforced the sense of purpose in the PLAF soldier. Far from receiving indoctrination only as a part of basic training, PLAF soldiers continually underwent political education in their units in the field. A captured PLAF training schedule from the Chau Thanh District listed combat or political training daily from 6:30 to 10:00 a.m.<sup>203</sup>

A third influence in maintaining morale was the self-criticism session. Held at varying intervals, but usually weekly, these sessions gave an outlet to the PLAF soldiers' emotions. The political officer conducting the session encouraged criticism, even of superiors. He would not, however, accept a superficial answer for a criticism. An accusation of a shortcoming, for example, resulted in continued probes of a soldier until he admitted that he was afraid of dying. Although being praised in front of peers was fine, the soldiers feared being the subject of criticism. While it is impossible to quantify the effectiveness of these sessions, the focus on introspection and public admission of fault must have influenced many soldiers not to be the subject of criticism. At the same time, this adversarial forum may have influenced some PLAF guerrillas to distance themselves from their comrades.<sup>204</sup> As one American who analyzed these sessions observed: "Probably this form of psychological control-which is distantly

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<sup>203</sup> Andrews, 107.

<sup>204</sup> Ben Newcomb, Ph.D., Texas Tech University, suggested this possible implication.

related to, but entirely different from, indoctrination-is one of the principal bonds by which the . . . army . . . is held together.<sup>205</sup>

One other influence affecting the PLAF soldiers' motivation was their nationalistic commitment to drive the United States from Vietnam. Many PLAF soldiers, characterizing the GVN and ARVN as "lackey forces" or "puppets," simply viewed the Southern regime as a symbol of American imperialism.<sup>206</sup> To these soldiers, the Americans, like the French before them, had no right to influence Vietnamese government or affairs. Le Thanh, a North Vietnamese, summarized his feelings toward the GVN and the U.S.:

We understood that the Americans were behind Diem and that they were exactly like the French. . . . I associated the Americans with the French. Both of them were imperialists. . . . I was enraged about the Southern regime and the Americans. I hated them.<sup>207</sup>

This fervent desire to rid Vietnam of foreign influence bonded soldiers of a wide ideological spectrum into units with a common purpose. While the PLAF fought with outdated or captured weapons against a numerically larger foe and continually reorganized its units to preserve security, it possessed attributes that the ARVN seemed to lack: a coherent plan for victory, thorough training, and a will to fight. The American advisors in Vietnam believed they were there for just those reasons.

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<sup>205</sup>Doyle et al., *The North*, 48.

<sup>206</sup>Tran Van Tra, 3, 17, and *passim*.

<sup>207</sup>Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, 59-60.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FIGHT

*It is better to die than to leave one's post.*<sup>208</sup>

-unidentified PLAF commander at Ap Bac

A wide range of factors influence the outcome of a battle. The armies' doctrine, training, organization, and equipment; the commanders' personalities and previous experiences; the terrain; and, in many cases, plain chance all affect the unfolding and decision of a battle. Ap Bac was no different from any other battle in these respects. Both belligerents came to Ap Bac inspired or burdened by their past and their doctrine. Although the commanders' and advisors' personalities affected the ARVN's performance more than the PLAF's, neither army could avoid the terrain's influence.

#### The Terrain and the Belligerents' Task Organizations and Plans

In any engagement or battle, the terrain is a neutral. It does, however, favor the commander who is best able to turn it to his advantage. As General George Marshall observes in *Infantry in Battle*: "The ground is an open book. The commander who reads and heeds what it has to say is laying a sound foundation for tactical success."<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup>Underlined in the original; *Ap Bac*, 18.

<sup>209</sup>George Marshall, ed., *Infantry in Battle* (Washington, D.C.: *The Infantry Journal*, 1939), 69.

Both belligerents had previously operated in the area surrounding Ap Bac, and both sought to use the terrain to their advantage.

Ap Bac lay approximately 20 kilometers northwest of My Tho (see Figure 2).<sup>210</sup>

Located in the Mekong River delta, Ap Bac was nestled amidst rice paddies and swamps. Canals crisscrossed the region, dividing it into numerous island-like sections. Although most canals were narrow, some larger canals, like the Ba Beo Canal to the north, supported boat movement. Along the canals, trees and scrub vegetation further reinforced the image that each paddy or section was an isolated little world.

Movement by either foot or vehicle was difficult, as few large roads crossed the canals. Footpaths and cartrails connected the many hamlets and villages, but they crossed the canals only by precarious footbridges. For mounted movement, wheeled vehicles were restricted to the few suitable roads in the area. The M113s easily traversed the rice paddies, but, though amphibious, met with difficulties when trying to cross the canals. The steeply sloped canal sides made it extremely difficult for the APCs to pull themselves up and out.<sup>211</sup> If the APCs were not able to cross a canal at a bridge

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<sup>210</sup>The following analysis relies on two adjacent 1:50,000 map sheets. National Geographic Directorate, *My Tho* (map) (Saigon: National Geographic Directorate, 1973). (Sheet 6229I, 1:50,000); National Geographic Directorate, *Khiem Ich* (map) (Saigon: National Geographic Directorate, 1973). (Sheet 6229IV, 1:50,000). (The Vietnam Archive).

<sup>211</sup>Department of the Army, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 41.

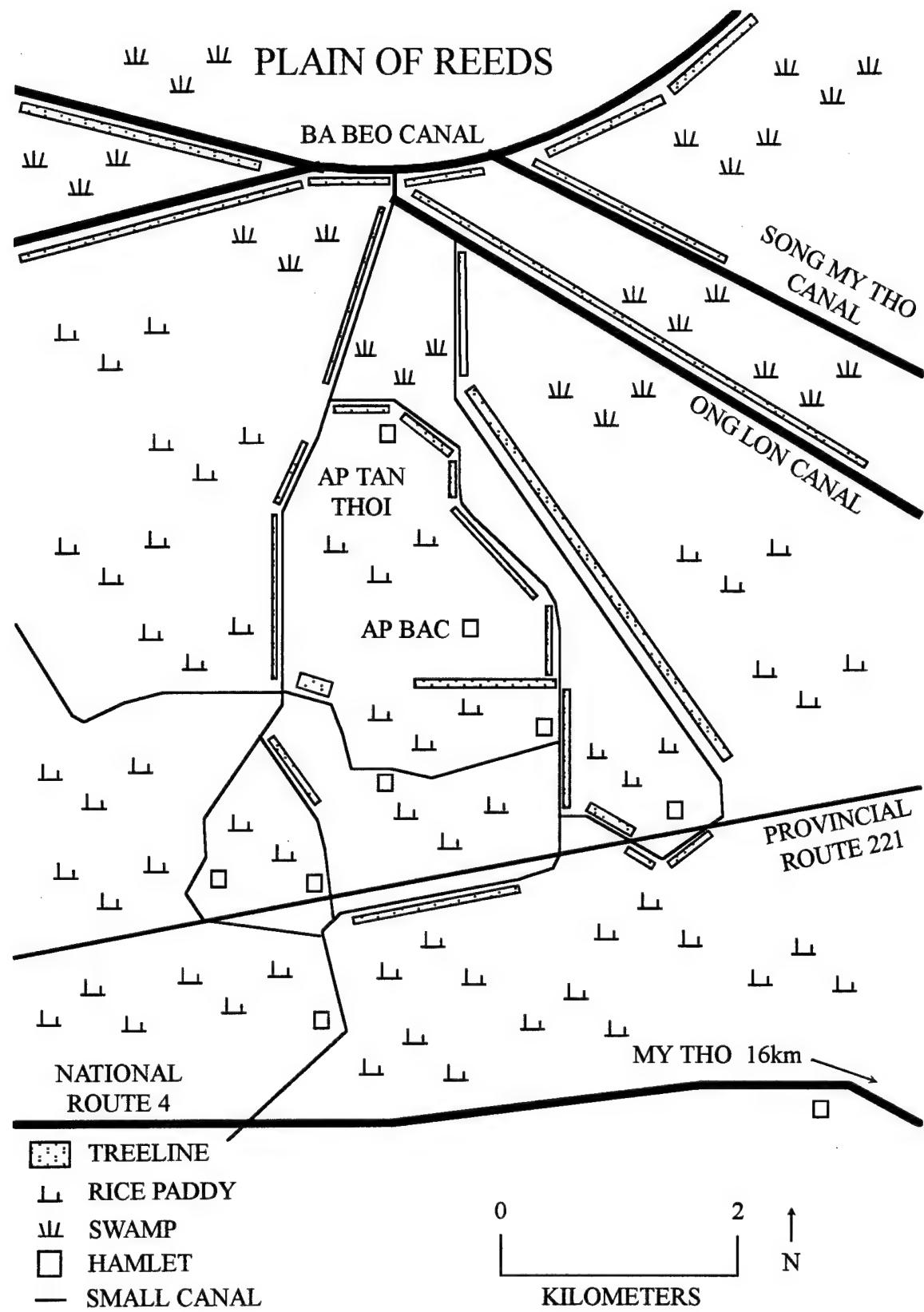


Figure 2. Map of Ap Bac and Vicinity

or suitable ford, their speed of movement was consequently reduced. In this region of Vietnam, air assets provided the ARVN with the only true means of rapid mobility.

The canals and their vegetation not only restricted movement, but they also restricted observation as well. When crossing the knee-deep paddies, a unit could only observe as far as the next canal, adversely affecting its ability to direct fires. Command and control were adversely affected as well; unless a commander were airborne, it was impossible for him to see other units beyond his paddy. Further, since the paddies themselves were flat and unobstructed, soldiers caught in the open while crossing the rice field had no cover or concealment. A unit dug in along a canal or treeline not only had the advantage of concealment and surprise, but of cover and protection as well.<sup>212</sup> While possessing advantages for both attacker and defender, the terrain at Ap Bac better favored the PLAF's plans, as the 7th Division discovered.

As 1962 came to a close, the PLAF observed ARVN preparations for battle. With Diem's birthday on 3 January, the PLAF believed that the ARVN units would conduct operations on either 1 or 2 January 1963 in order to gain a victory just prior to the president's birthday.<sup>213</sup> Although suffering defeats throughout the year at the hands of the heliborne and armored ARVN units, the PLAF had conducted four successful

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<sup>212</sup>Senior Advisor, 7th Infantry Division, After Action Report for the Battle of Ap Bac, 9 January 1963, 4 (hereafter AAR). (U.S. Army Center of Military History Files [hereafter CMH]). This document is a transcription of the original report and contains numerous omissions and errors. A carbon of the original report, though blurry, is in folder 11, box 38, VSVWC.

<sup>213</sup>*Ap Bac, 7.*

counter mopping-up operations since September 1962.<sup>214</sup> Confident in his soldiers' abilities, the PLAF commander outlined four plans to counter the imminent ARVN attack, all of which were offensive in nature.<sup>215</sup> Unlike previous engagements in which the PLAF initiated and then broke contact shortly thereafter, this time the PLAF was going to stand and fight.

The PLAF commander arrayed his forces along the canals to the north, east, and south of Ap Bac (see Figure 3). To the north, 1st Company, 514th Provincial Battalion (C1/514), a main force company, anchored its right flank in Ap Tan Thoi, oriented to the southwest. Further to the south along the canal, 1st Company, 261st Regional Battalion (C1/261), formed a semi-circle around Ap Bac. Tied in to C1/514's left flank, C1/261's elements to the north and east of Ap Bac oriented to the southwest and west. The company's southern-most element, defending along the east-west treeline south of Ap Bac, oriented due south.<sup>216</sup> Reinforcing these units were elements of 5th Company, 261st Battalion (C5/261), 13th Support Unit, also main force units, and guerrillas from both regional and local PLAF units. Although estimates vary, the PLAF battalion

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<sup>214</sup>Ap Bac lists four separate engagements but states "our 3 successful counter mopping-up operations." See p. 64, above. Ibid., 2 and *passim*.

<sup>215</sup>Typical of most PLAF documents which strove for secrecy, the after action report for Ap Bac identifies only three low-ranking guerillas by name. Ibid., 10; Sheehan, 205.

<sup>216</sup>James McCoy, *Secrets of the Viet Cong* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1992), 45; Ap Bac, sketch 1.

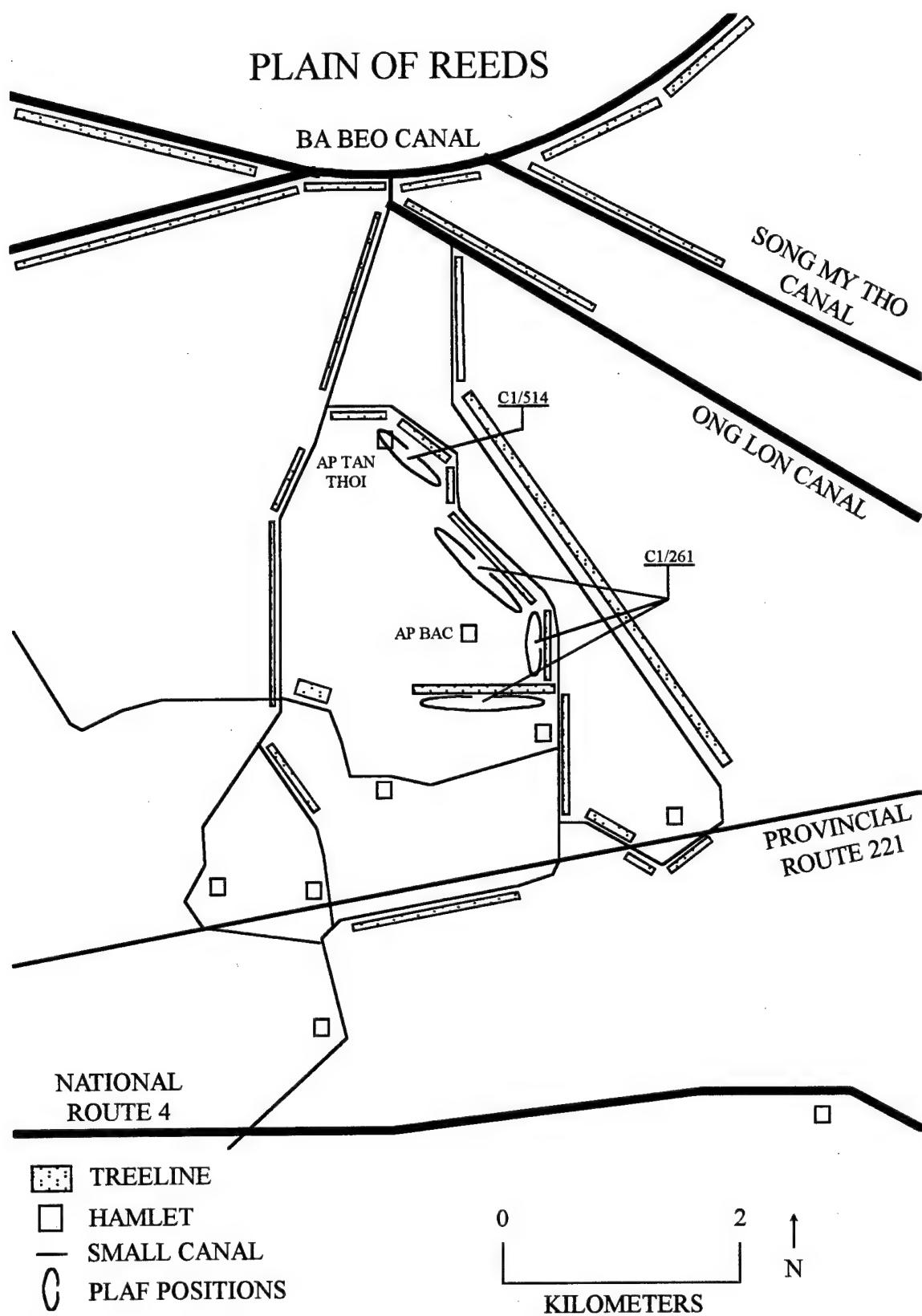


Figure 3. Map of PLAF Positions, 2200 01 January 1963

commander at Ap Tan Thoi controlled at least two companies with reinforcements numbering some 340 guerrillas.<sup>217</sup>

The PLAF guerrillas' level of experience varied. Some had participated in earlier counter mopping-up operations and possessed combat experience. Most of the cadre had seen combat, but C1/514 had recently replaced "up to 1/3 of its strength . . . after its previous operations and losses."<sup>218</sup> The regionals and locals also "were not well trained in combat, but they were familiar with the maintenance of security."<sup>219</sup> Many recruits would gain their first taste of combat with the coming of the new year.

The PLAF units around Ap Bac mustered one 60mm mortar, approximately 12 Browning Automatic Rifles (BARs) and four .30 caliber machine guns, and at least one heavy machine gun.<sup>220</sup> Realizing the potential air threat to his units, the battalion commander directed that "[e]ach unit must form an anti-aircraft cell responsible for the

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<sup>217</sup> *Ap Bac*, 8, lists two regular companies (100 each), a support unit (30), two squads of C5/261 (7 each), one regional platoon (30), one provincial platoon (30), 30 local guerrillas, and two cells (6) (parenthetical numbers are author's estimates). Palmer's *Summons of the Trumpet* places PLAF strength at 500 (44). Sheehan estimates "about 320 Main Force and Regional guerrillas" (206).

<sup>218</sup> *Ap Bac*, 8.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*; Halberstam, 148; AAR, 4. *Ap Bac* specifies that the 13th Support Unit brought "1 MG and 1 - 60mm Mortar"; Halberstam states that there were least 12 BARs and three machine guns; AAR identifies at least four .30 caliber machine guns. With BARs as a platoon asset and light machine guns (.30 caliber) as a company asset, 12 and four are not unreasonable estimates. Department of the Army, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam*, 146.

security for their area . . . [and] must dig gun emplacements beforehand.”<sup>221</sup> Beginning their preparations early, the units completed their positions by 2200 on 1 January.<sup>222</sup> Although not knowing the exact time and location of the ARVN approach, the PLAF was dug in and prepared for the attack to come.

As had been the case throughout 1962, although Lieutenant Colonel Bui Dinh Dam, the newly appointed 7th Division commander, knew there were PLAF units in the area, he did not know exactly where. Previously the division chief of staff, Colonel Dam lacked the skills necessary to lead a division in combat. Although a dedicated professional and an able administrator, he was ill-suited for command.<sup>223</sup> David Halberstam characterizes him as “a nice little man and good staff officer, but [he] did not want responsibility. . . . [He was] terrified of battle, helicopters, and [General Huynh Van] Cao [the IV Corps commander].”<sup>224</sup> Dam was an odd choice for division command, but perhaps a logical one: by elevating Dam, Cao prevented a rival from commanding one of the ARVN’s premier divisions.<sup>225</sup>

Between 28 December and 1 January, the division received reports that a PLAF radio station was operating in the vicinity of Ap Tan Thoi. Colonel Dam believed that a reinforced company guarded the station. His American-Vietnamese joint planning staff

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<sup>221</sup>Ap Bac, 10.

<sup>222</sup>Ibid.

<sup>223</sup>Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 41.

<sup>224</sup>Halberstam, 146.

<sup>225</sup>Sheehan, 203.

developed the operation's concept around an expected enemy strength of one company.<sup>226</sup> Naming the operation DUC THANG 1, the division staff, on 1 January at 1900, briefed the following mission statement: "The 7th Infantry Division attacks at 020630 January 1963 to seize or destroy a VC radio and a VC company in the vicinity of XS 300 558" [map grid location for Ap Tan Thoi].<sup>227</sup>

The staff's concept of the operation was simple. A provisional regiment of CG units would attack from south to north, oriented on Ap Tan Thoi; an ARVN infantry battalion would move by helicopter to a landing zone (LZ) to the north of Ap Tan Thoi and then attack south; and a mechanized company would attack from the west. A ranger company, an infantry company, and a support company would remain as the division's reserve.<sup>228</sup> In essence, the 7th Division would establish a three-sided cordon around Ap Tan Thoi. The fourth side of the encirclement, to the east, was left open. If the PLAF chose to retreat to the east, the ARVN would use artillery and air assets to destroy the guerrillas caught in the open.

Dam had significant forces at his disposal to conduct this operation. The Dinh Tuong Regiment (Provisional), under the command of Major Lam Quang Tho, province chief of Dinh Tuong Province, would attack from the south and west. Comprised of the 17th Civil Guard Battalion and the 4th Mechanized Rifle Squadron, 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment (4/2 ACR), Tho's force was a polyglot unit. The southern force, massing some

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<sup>226</sup>AAR, 4.

<sup>227</sup>Ibid., 16, 5.

<sup>228</sup>Ibid.

six companies, would attack with two task forces abreast: Task Force A, 17th CG Battalion, in the east; and Task Force B, 17th CG Battalion, to the west.<sup>229</sup> As with most CG units, the 17th was poorly trained, but the division commander believed that their numbers were sufficient for the task.<sup>230</sup>

Tho's most powerful asset was 4/2 ACR, commanded by Captain Ly Tong Ba. Previously designated the 7th Mechanized Company, Ba's company would attack from the west with 13 APCs, two less than authorized by TOE.<sup>231</sup> Organized in April 1962, 4/2 ACR completed its nine week training program in June and had seen combat throughout the summer and fall.<sup>232</sup> Although relatively successful against the PLAF in September, Ba's company demonstrated a need for additional training.<sup>233</sup> Both the CG battalion and the M113 company were Department of Defense assets, but Tho, as province chief, answered to the Department of the Interior. This command relationship effectively placed the Dinh Tuong Regiment outside of Dam's jurisdiction, making Dam's orders to Tho more suggestions than directives.

The 7th Division's northern unit was the 2d Battalion, 11th Infantry (2/11 IN). It would move in three serials to the LZ in ten H-21s of the 93d Transportation Company.

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<sup>229</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>230</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>231</sup>Ba's unit remained a company-sized element despite its optimistic "mechanized rifle squadron" designation. Department of the Army, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 24; *Ap Bac*, 1.

<sup>232</sup>Department of the Army, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 22.

<sup>233</sup>Ibid., 24.

The original plan called for sixteen H-21s from the 57th Transportation Company, which could conduct the assault in one serial, but the ARVN General Staff directed that the 57th support a higher priority mission to the north.<sup>234</sup> The Utility Tactical Transport Helicopter Company (UTTHC) would provide five UH-1Bs, the newest helicopters in the Army's inventory, to support the landings and to provide overwatch for the operation.

Six divisional 4.2" mortars, four divisional and provincial 105mm howitzers, and four 155mm howitzers from the corps artillery provided the artillery support.<sup>235</sup> Although air assets were originally not allocated to the operation, the air liaison officer (ALO) requested that higher headquarters be prepared to divert assets in the "event of an emergency."<sup>236</sup> In short, Dam was preparing to assault the expected PLAF company at Ap Tan Thoi with units numbering over 1200 soldiers converging from three directions. It appeared that Operation DUC THANG 1--in English, Operation VICTORY 1--would be a walkover. The PLAF, however, thought otherwise.

### The Battle of Ap Bac

Operation DUC THANG 1 began early on the morning of 2 January 1963. Before daybreak, River Assault Group 21, using one landing craft, medium (LCM), and 13 landing craft, vehicle and personnel (LCVP), carried the 352d Ranger Company from

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<sup>234</sup>AAR, 15.

<sup>235</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>236</sup>Ibid., 16.

My Tho to the north along the canals adjacent to Ap Tan Thoi. These shallow-draft craft landed in an area just north of 2/11 IN's LZ to allow the 352d to establish blocking positions there.

Not wanting to allow the PLAF to escape to the Plain of Reeds before daybreak and the arrival of 2/11 IN, the rangers disembarked between 0300 and 0400 and established their positions to prevent the guerrillas from withdrawing to the north.<sup>237</sup> Once set, the ranger company awaited the first helicopter serial of 2/11 IN, which was scheduled to touch down some three hours later. From its locations along the canal, the 352d, as part of the 7th Division's reserve, was prepared to reinforce 2/11 IN to the south, if necessary.

The noise of the rangers' landings did not go unnoticed. The PLAF units around Ap Tan Thoi and Ap Bac heard "the noises of enemy vehicle [sic] and boats."<sup>238</sup> Reacting to the threat, the battalion commander ordered his units to their fighting positions. By 0500, some two and a half hours before the first ARVN serial was scheduled to land, the PLAF units were ready for combat.<sup>239</sup> For this operation, unlike earlier ARVN sweeps, the PLAF would not be surprised by the arrival of helicopters and APCs.

At 0630, Lieutenant Colonel John Vann took off in an L-19, a light, two-seater aircraft, to supervise 2/11 IN's serials and to observe and relay information to Colonel

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<sup>237</sup>Ibid., 2, 16; *Ap Bac*, 11.

<sup>238</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>239</sup>Ibid.

Dam, who chose to remain at the division command post. Vann, the division's senior advisor, was a career officer who had entered the U.S. Army during World War II and trained as a navigator for B-29s but never saw combat.<sup>240</sup> Having fought in Korea, he understood and embodied the Army's offensive and aggressive spirit.<sup>241</sup> He saw his role as a goad to his ARVN counterpart, urging him to continually engage the PLAF. Halberstam remembers him as having "little polish"; he was "blunt . . . at times reactionary."<sup>242</sup> These traits were apparent in a discussion Vann had with Harkins during a briefing about an ARVN operation. Harkins cautioned Vann about his aggressive, and potentially offensive, nature. Vann's response was direct: "I'm not here to save their [Vietnamese] face, I'm here to save their ass."<sup>243</sup> As one former State Department official observed: "He didn't stand much on formality. . . . He told it like it was."<sup>244</sup>

An intense man, Vann was energetic, always in motion, and "evoked strong reactions in all who met him."<sup>245</sup> Yet for all his bluster and aggressiveness, Vann understood the essence of how to fight an insurgency. He continually fought against the ARVN's penchant for indiscriminate use of artillery and CAS. Such tactics only

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<sup>240</sup>Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* exhaustingly retells Vann's life. *Ibid.*, 430-431.

<sup>241</sup>*Ibid.*, 468.

<sup>242</sup>Halberstam, 164.

<sup>243</sup>Maitland et al., 62.

<sup>244</sup>Don Walker, Ph.D., Texas Tech University, interview by author, 11 September 1997, Lubbock, TX, Holden Hall, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

<sup>245</sup>Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 39.

alienated the people and pushed them further from the GVN and into the arms of the PLAF.<sup>246</sup> As Halberstam records Vann's views: "This is a political war and it calls for discrimination in killing. The best weapon for killing would be a knife, but I'm afraid we can't do it that way. The worst is the airplane. The next worst is artillery. Barring a knife, the best is a rifle-you know who you're killing."<sup>247</sup>

Vann maintained a clear image in his mind of how the 7th Division and its commanders should prosecute the war, and he took every opportunity to express his views. As an advisor, however, he was not the commander; Colonel Dam was. Although Vann "was as good as we [the United States] had out there," his abilities alone would not be enough to bring the ARVN victory at Ap Bac.<sup>248</sup>

Five minutes after Vann's take off, at 0635, Major Tho reported that his units, Task Force A, Task Force B, and 4/2 ACR, had crossed the line of departure five minutes earlier, as briefed the night before. Despite a building ground fog, the first serial of 2/11 IN in ten H-21s, with five UH-1Bs escorting, took off from Tan Hiep airstrip and flew to the LZ north of Ap Tan Thoi. Landing at 0700, the first serial did not meet any

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<sup>246</sup>Sheehan, 107-108.

<sup>247</sup>Halberstam, 167; Vann echoed these sentiments in his later briefings. Vann, briefing notes, n.d., 3; Lieutenant Colonel John Vann, cancelled JCS brief, 8 July 1963, 4. (Folder 3, box 39, VSVWC).

<sup>248</sup>General William B. Rosson, U.S. Army (Retired), interview by author, 15 April 1997, Lubbock, TX, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

resistance (see Figure 4). The American advisor for 2/11 IN, Captain Kenneth Good, established communications with Vann and reported no enemy contact.<sup>249</sup>

After the helicopters returned to Tan Hiep to pick up the second serial, the ground fog became too dense for the H-21s to lift off safely. For almost two hours, the helicopters, prisoners of nature, sat at Tan Hiep. While the remainder of the battalion sat at the airstrip, Good and the forward elements of 2/11 IN continued south to Ap Tan Thoi.<sup>250</sup>

At the same time, the 352d Ranger Company received orders to move south and reinforce the 2d Battalion. After moving some 500 meters, the rangers lost one man (KIA) to a mine and stopped. Despite its mission as the reserve and its proximity to Ap Tan Thoi, the ranger company had little influence upon the coming engagements. Some time later in the day, the company received orders to reembark and return to guard the 11th Regiment's command post at My Tho, a move which deprived Colonel Dam of approximately 1/3 of his designated reserve.<sup>251</sup>

To the south, the ARVN plan met its second and more serious hitch of the day. Task Force A, while crossing a rice paddy, came under fire at about 0742 from elements of the PLAF's C1/261. Located in the east/west treeline just south of Ap Bac, the PLAF

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<sup>249</sup>AAR, 5-6.

<sup>250</sup>Ibid.

<sup>251</sup>Ibid., 16.

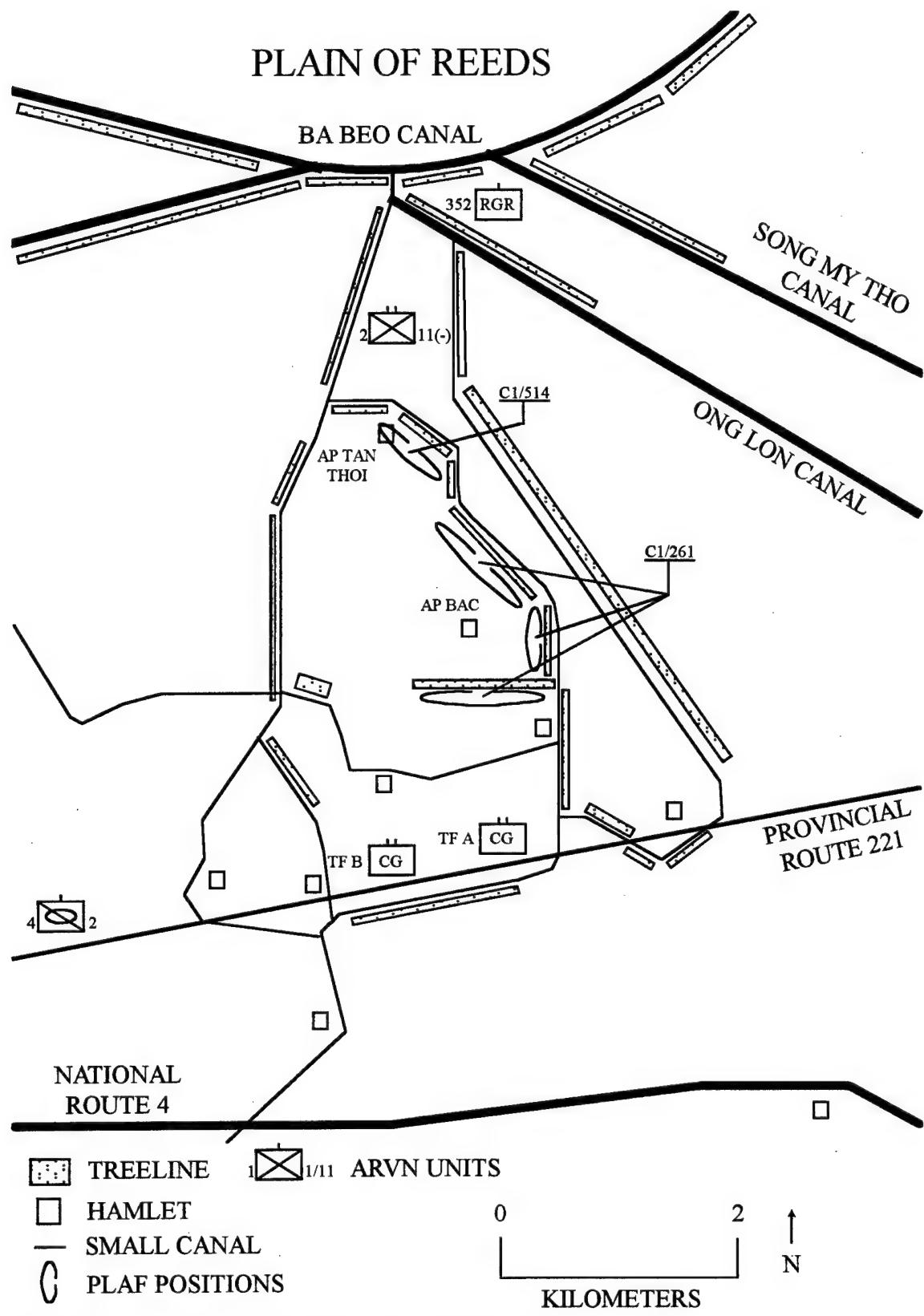


Figure 4. Map of ARVN Unit Locations, 0700 02 January 1963

quickly pinned down the CG units that were in the open.<sup>252</sup> Dam, having no idea that his southern wing was under attack, believed his operation was going according to plan.

By 0900, Vann's aircraft had to be refueled. Landing at Tan Hiep, he met with Dam to brief him on 2/11 IN's progress. Neither were aware of the difficulties Task Force A faced in the south. As Vann took off, the second serial of 2/11 left Tan Hiep for the LZ. Because the forward elements had been moving south, Vann, with Dam's approval, shifted the LZ some 750 meters to the south. Once again, the H-21s disgorged their human cargo without incident. By 0935, the last serial landed at the LZ, and 2/11 IN now had all its combat strength on the ground. Shortly after the third serial landed, the battalion took fire from the treeline to its west. Reacting to and closing with the contact, the ARVN soldiers found a French rifle, two grenades, and two PLAF guerrillas. Taking them prisoner, the battalion continued its southern march.<sup>253</sup> That 2/11 IN landed three serials without incident should not be surprising; the PLAF defenses of C1/514 around Ap Tan Thoi were about 1500 meters away from the LZ and oriented to the southwest, away from the LZ. With a treeline between 2/11 IN and C1/514, it would have been difficult for the guerrillas to effectively mass fires on the landing helicopters.<sup>254</sup>

Dam gained his first indication that all was not going according to plan at approximately 0945. The division command post received a radio transmission stating

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<sup>252</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>253</sup>Ibid.

<sup>254</sup>*Ap Bac*, sketch 1.

that Task Force A had been in contact since 0742 and was fixed by PLAF fire. Closing to within 30 meters of the enemy positions, Task Force A initiated the contact with C1/261. Dug in, the guerrillas returned fire, and after 15 minutes, the CG unit began to withdraw. From roughly 0800 to 0945, Task Force A exchanged fire with C1/261 and assaulted twice, but the PLAF drove them back both times with casualties.<sup>255</sup>

Attempting to break the stalemate, Dam then directed Captain Richard Ziegler, the 7th Advisory Detachment's operations officer (S3), to relay the information to Vann. Dam also specified that Vann reconnoiter two possible LZs in the general vicinity of Ap Bac. For the next ten minutes, Vann circled the potential LZs in his L-19 to determine which one would better suit the reserve's landing. Vann rejected the eastern area as too small and selected the LZ to the west of Ap Bac.<sup>256</sup>

Turning the L-19 to the west, Captain O'Neill, a pilot from the 93d Transportation Company, brought Vann over the western LZ. Looking closely, Vann could not detect any PLAF guerrillas in the vicinity of Ap Bac. Vann was cautious, however, because Ap Bac "looked suspicious from the air in that it was the principal built up area."<sup>257</sup> With Task Force A having been in contact for more than two hours, and no visible PLAF forces in the treeline, Vann made the fateful decision to insert the reserve to the west of Ap Bac. Vann advised O'Neill that he wanted the reserve placed

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<sup>255</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>256</sup>AAR, 6.

<sup>257</sup>Ibid.

some 300 meters from the woodline to reduce their exposure time. O'Neill then passed Vann's instructions to the H-21s and guided them in on arrival.<sup>258</sup>

As Vann determined the reserve's LZ, the situation for Task Force A was becoming critical. By 1000, Task Force A had sustained numerous casualties, including the task force commander (KIA) and one of the company commanders (WIA). Perhaps responding to Diem's earlier warning to Cao about casualties, Tho decided to cut his losses. Ordering his CG units into static blocking positions, he requested that Dam commit the reserve to relieve the pressure on his units. Although Task Force B, to the west, still had not made contact, Tho was content to hold his units in place, leaving Task Force A exposed in the paddy and Task Force B powerless to help.<sup>259</sup>

The province chief recognized the need for an experienced officer to lead Task Force A and ordered the 17th CG Battalion's commander to the field to assume command. Despite the urgency of the situation, "no attempt to affect this replacement [of commanders] was physically accomplished after his [the 17th CG Battalion's commander] arrival in the field which covered a period of approximately six (6) hours."<sup>260</sup> Only three kilometers from the line of departure, the hapless CG unit awaited

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<sup>258</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>259</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>260</sup>Major Jack Macslarrow, U.S. Army, My Tho, to Major Lam Quang Tho, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, My Tho, 3 January 1963. (Folder 11, box 38, VSVWC).

the 17th's commander, but, until he arrived, Tho refused to attack with Task Force A because it lacked a "seasoned, experienced and capable commander."<sup>261</sup>

Shortly after O'Neill relayed the location of the LZ, the 1st Company, 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry (1/11 IN), was winging its way to Ap Bac. The company's 100 men did not expect the greeting they were to receive from the PLAF, nor did the pilots, Vann, or Dam. Whether good luck on the part of the PLAF, poor judgment on the part of the pilots, or a combination of both, the reserve company landed in a hornet's nest. Oriented to the west and southwest, C1/261's defensive positions faced directly into the LZ. Instead of landing 300 meters to the west of the treeline, as Vann had directed, the helicopters set down only 200 to 230 meters from the trees, within small arms range of the PLAF positions.<sup>262</sup> As the H-21s touched down, several of the pilots reported immediately that they were taking fire. As one pilot claimed later, "The tree line seemed to explode with machine-gun fire. It was pure hell."<sup>263</sup> The UH-1Bs began firing into the eastern and southern treelines, but the guerrillas' fire did not slacken. Nine H-21s lifted off, leaving one on the ground.

As the helicopters left for Tan Hiep, one circled the LZ and put down between the damaged H-21 on the ground and the treeline. Not surprisingly, it, too, was damaged and could not again lift off. Since the five UH-1Bs were still circling the LZ

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<sup>261</sup>Ibid.

<sup>262</sup>Vann, cancelled JCS brief, 7. (Folder 3, box 39, VSVWC); AAR, 7.

<sup>263</sup>"The Helicopter War Runs into Trouble," *Time* LXXXI (11 January 1963):

and firing suppression, one left the formation and circled the two downed H-21s at a low altitude. Coming around for another pass, the UH-1B approached to land to the west of the Shawnees. Prior to touching down, the Huey lost its tail rotor to PLAF fire, flipped on its right side, and crashed.<sup>264</sup>

Although two of its ten H-21s were down, the 93d Transportation Company was not finished suffering losses. As the UH-1B attempted to rescue the downed aircrews, another H-21 landed some two kilometers to the northeast of Ap Bac, forced down by damage sustained at the LZ. A second H-21 landed beside the first, picked up its crew, and proceeded to Tan Hiep (see Figure 5).<sup>265</sup> In a span of approximately five minutes, the Americans lost more than 25% of the air assets committed to the operation. The PLAF had effectively demonstrated its new-found skill at countering American technological superiority.

Vann, still circling in the L-19, surveyed the damaged H-21s and UH-1B and requested that Colonel Dam direct 4/2 ACR to the LZ to assist 1/1/11 IN and to secure the downed helicopters. Dam agreed to issue the order, and Captain Ziegler radioed the division commander's concurrence to Vann. When Vann asked to commit Ba's company, the M113s were located on the far side of the north/south canal to the west of Ap Bac (see Figure 6). What transpired over the next three hours is one of the more inexplicable facets of the battle. Ba, who had previously demonstrated a willingness to

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<sup>264</sup>Message, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 021447ZJAN63. (Frame 169, reel 4, *The John F. Kennedy National Security Files, 1961-1963* [hereafter JFK]); AAR, 7.

<sup>265</sup>Ibid.

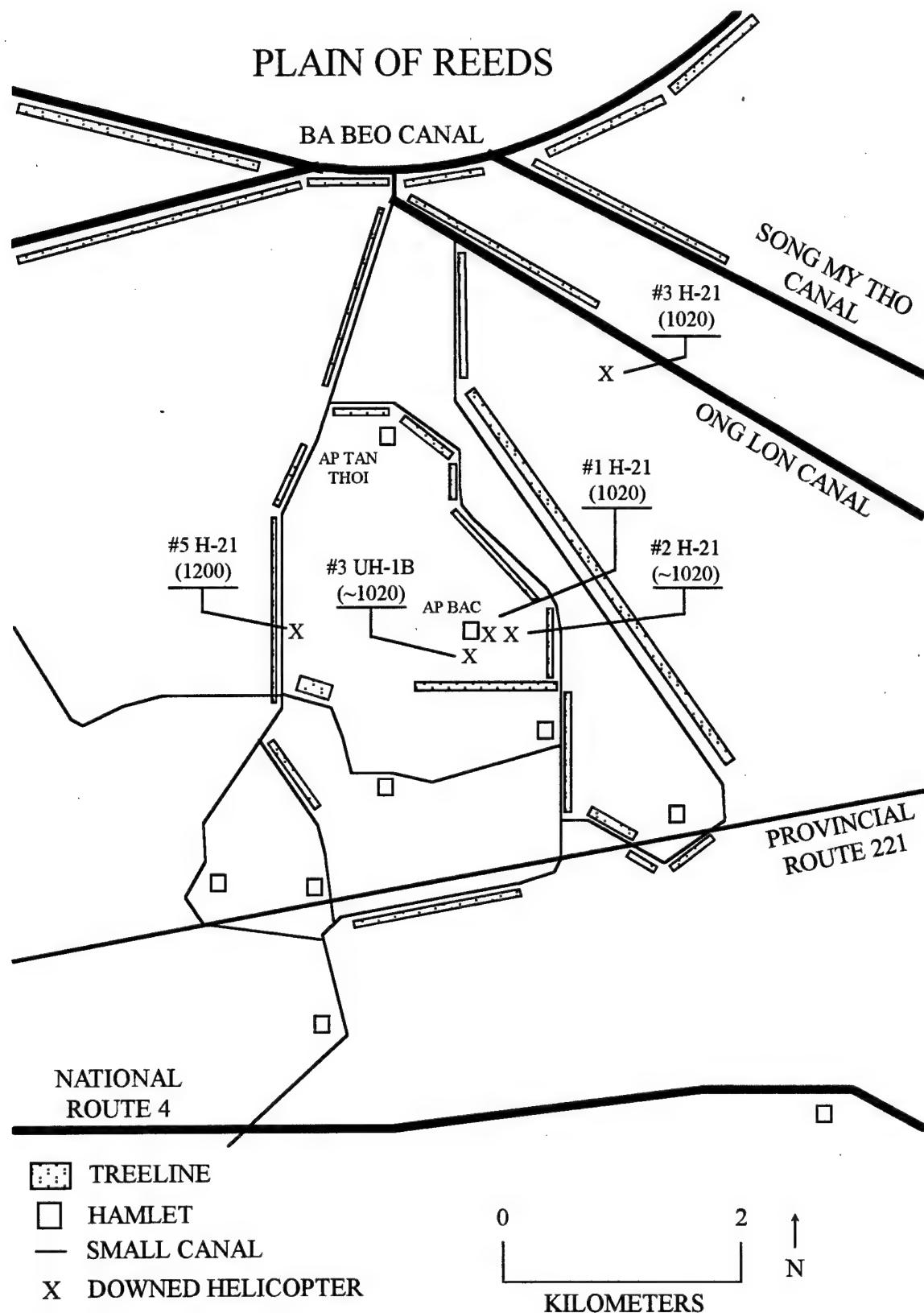


Figure 5. Map of Downed Helicopter Locations, 02 January 1963

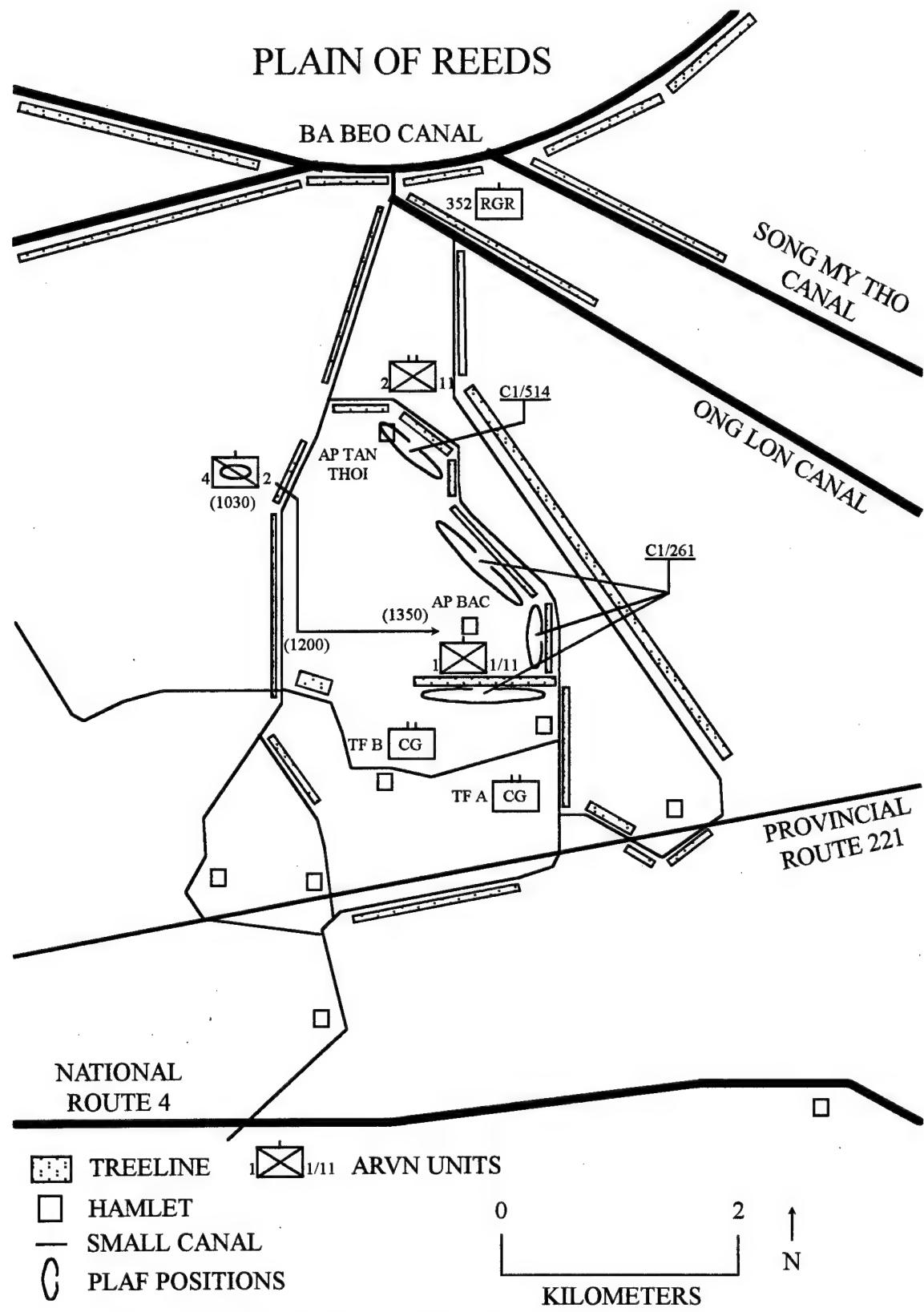


Figure 6. Map of ARVN Unit Locations, 1030 02 January 1963

close with the enemy, held his unit on the west side of the canal for almost an hour. By now, 4/2 ACR saw the smoke rising from Ap Bac, less than two kilometers away, but Ba did not deploy his company.<sup>266</sup>

Vann established radio communication with Captain James Scanlon, the American advisor for the 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment, and Captain Robert Mays, another American advisor, who were with 4/2 ACR.<sup>267</sup> Vann, in an attempt to expedite the M113s, told the advisors that Dam had ordered Ba to proceed to Ap Bac. Mays consulted with Ba, who replied that he would not move. Although an officer junior to Colonel Dam, Ba did not respond to Dam's directive. Ba's immediate superior was Major Tho, the Dinh Thuong Regiment and 2d ACR commander; technically, Dam's orders for 4/2 ACR were not binding. As the after action report states: "Despite numerous additional communications between the Senior Advisor [Vann] and Captain Mays, and by Captain Mays pleading with the M-113 unit commander to move out, the H-113 [sic] unit remained in this position for nearly an hour."<sup>268</sup> Tho's refusal to commit his forces was not limited to one instance; throughout the day, Tho refused Dam's orders at least three times.<sup>269</sup> With both the division reserve and Task Force A pinned down

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<sup>266</sup>Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>267</sup>Ibid., 4; Sheehan, 227; Department of the Army, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 27.

<sup>268</sup>AAR, 8.

<sup>269</sup>Ibid., 17.

and suffering casualties, Tho kept static the two units most in a position to assist the troubled units: Task Force B and 4/2 ACR.

While Ba refused to move, Vann observed artillery landing in and around Ap Bac. Receiving word from Vann that some rounds were falling wide of the probable PLAF positions, the division command post responded that an ARVN L-19 was observing and adjusting the rounds. Satisfied, Vann headed south to observe the CG units. Task Force A appeared to be no longer in contact. To the west, Task Force B had moved some 800 meters to the north, short of the east/west treeline south of Ap Bac. Vann urged Ziegler to impress upon Dam the urgency of closing all available units on the reserve's LZ.<sup>270</sup>

Shortly after 1100, Vann received a report that there were two seriously wounded Americans on the LZ.<sup>271</sup> Both were helicopter crewmen who had received wounds shortly after landing. Sergeant First Class Arnold Bowers, another American advisor, had landed with the reserve and was on the LZ. When the Huey crashed, Bowers ran to it to ensure that all the crew members were out. Finding Sergeant William Deal, the crew chief, dangling from his harness inside the helicopter, Bowers removed him from the wreckage. By the time Bowers had cleared Deal from the helicopter, Bowers realized that the crew chief was dead.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>270</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>271</sup>Ibid.

<sup>272</sup>Department of Defense Press Release, 3 January 1963. (Frame 185, reel 4, *JFK*); Sheehan, 216, 221-222.

Leaving Deal, Bowers then went to the downed Shawnee nearest the treeline and found Specialist Fourth Class (SP/4) Donald Braman, the crew chief, inside. Braman had received a shoulder wound that to Bowers did not appear serious. Bowers recommended that Braman stay in the helicopter to ensure that the paddy water did not infect the wound. Braman agreed to await medical evacuation (medevac) inside the aircraft.<sup>273</sup>

At about half past eleven, Ba's company began to cross the north/south canal and move to the LZ. While both CG units to the south remained in place, artillery and CAS rained down around Ap Bac. Responding to the report of American casualties, Vann requested and received air support in the form of two H-21s and three UH-1Bs. Making three passes over the LZ and not receiving fire, Vann recommended to the flight leader that only one H-21 set down on the LZ while the UH-1Bs fired suppression.<sup>274</sup>

Acting on his recommendation, one H-21 landed to the west of the downed helicopters. Immediately receiving fire, the H-21 took off again, without either Deal or Braman. Barely able to maintain control, the pilot, following guidance from Captain O'Neill in the L-19, set down on the near side of the north/south canal amidst Ba's company. The Americans had lost yet another helicopter, bringing their total losses for the battle to five (see Figure 5). The second H-21 landed next to the first, evacuated its crew, and returned to Tan Hiep, escorted by the UH-1Bs. Vann, witnessing the effective

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<sup>273</sup>Department of Defense Press Release, 3 January 1963. (Frame 185, reel 4, JFK); Sheehan, 222-223.

<sup>274</sup>AAR, 8.

PLAF fire, informed Colonel Dam that further medevac attempts were futile until the M113s secured the LZ.<sup>275</sup>

Shortly after noon, ARVN units began to move toward Ap Bac. In the north, 2/11 IN had split into three elements and converged on the hamlet from three separate directions. The PLAF battalion commander, receiving word from local civilians that ARVN soldiers were approaching, dispatched four cells to the north side of Ap Tan Thoi to hinder the battalion's approach. Tied in with another squad that guarded their flank, the guerrillas came into contact with the ARVN battalion.<sup>276</sup>

Waiting until 2/11 IN had closed to within 20 meters of their positions, C1/514 opened fire, catching the ARVN soldiers by surprise. Attempting to reinforce success, the PLAF company commander reinforced his northern elements with a full platoon, bringing his strength against 2/11 IN to approximately 50 guerrillas. The ARVN soldiers, some still crossing the canal north of Ap Tan Thoi, massed to assault the village. During the next five hours, 2/11 IN mounted three separate assaults against the PLAF. Although 2/11 IN gained ground against the flanking squad, the PLAF managed to hold off each attack. After the third assault, the ARVN soldiers took to ground to allow the artillery and CAS to assist them. As the PLAF after action report observed, 2/11 IN had lost its momentum in the attack because the ARVN no longer had "the bravery to assault."<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>276</sup>*Ap Bac*, 15; AAR, 17.

<sup>277</sup>*Ap Bac*, 16.

While 2/11 IN struggled with the PLAF north of Ap Tan Thoi, Ba's company was making slow progress crossing the north/south canal. Some of 4/2 ACR's carriers were now abreast of Ap Bac and turned to the east. At the same time, Task Force B began a slow movement to the northeast to close with the C1/261 elements that were in the treeline south of Ap Bac. The task force's left flank was now tied in with the carriers. To the PLAF in the treeline, it seemed that a coordinated ARVN attack was developing. Some elements of the C1/261 platoon holding Task Force A at bay began to withdraw, but the PLAF battalion commander ordered them to return to their positions, stating, "*It is better to die at one's post.*"<sup>278</sup> The guerrillas steeled themselves for the pending envelopment.

Although seeming to gain momentum, the envelopment of the PLAF's western flank never materialized. Task Force B, while tied in with the carriers, stopped in its tracks. The commander, realizing his opportunity to roll up the PLAF's flank, requested permission to attack four separate times, but Tho refused each time. Leaving the CG soldiers behind, the carriers continued forward in small groups against seemingly slackening resistance and without clearing the treeline on their southern flank.<sup>279</sup>

Shortly before two in the afternoon, elements of 4/2 ACR began their assault toward the LZ and the treeline on the far side of Ap Bac. At 1350, the PLAF opened fire on the lead two APCs from a machine gun position some 50 meters away. Unable to

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<sup>278</sup>Underlined in original; *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>279</sup>AAR, 17.

identify the machine gun position, the APCs returned ineffective fire.<sup>280</sup> Sergeant Bowers, who had met up earlier with Captain Mays, jumped off one of the carriers and ran with Mays to Braman's H-21. Entering the helicopter, they found that Braman was dead, the second American killed at Ap Bac.<sup>281</sup>

The APCs' crews began to take casualties from the PLAF fire. The M113 drivers tended to elevate their seats for better observation, even though their stations were equipped with periscopes to allow them to sit inside the APCs while driving. The lead APC's driver did so and suffered a head wound which killed him.<sup>282</sup> The vehicle commanders also lacked protection for their upper torsos while manning the .50 caliber machine guns. They, too, suffered heavily from the PLAF fire. Staying low in the turret rings to minimize their exposure and unable to identify the PLAF positions in the treeline, the APC commanders were unsuccessful in suppressing the guerrillas. After withstanding the withering fire for a time, the APCs backed up, leaving 1/1/11 IN and their wounded on the LZ.<sup>283</sup>

Ba, who had crossed the rest of his carriers, again rushed the treeline. Not able to mass his carriers for an organized assault, Ba attacked piecemeal, with APCs rushing the treeline in twos and threes. The guerrillas, taking advantage of the disjointed ARVN

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<sup>280</sup>Ap Bac, 18.

<sup>281</sup>Sheehan, 247-248.

<sup>282</sup>Ibid., 248.

<sup>283</sup>Ibid., 251; AAR, 9; Department of the Army, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 27.

attack, focused their efforts on the small groups of carriers. Leaving their positions, two PLAF soldiers engaged two APCs that came too close to the treeline without infantry support. One, firing a rifle grenade, and the other, tossing a hand grenade, dropped their munitions through the upper cargo hatches, knocking the two M113s out of action.<sup>284</sup>

One M113, mounting a flame thrower, closed to engage the PLAF at a range of 100 meters. Malfunctioning, it threw out "a large ball of flame . . . to a range of 23-30 meters," causing Captain Scanlon to remark that it resembled "the force and effect of a Zippo lighter."<sup>285</sup> Taking further casualties, the APCs, seeking protection from the PLAF fire, again withdrew behind the downed helicopters and waited. Artillery and CAS continued to fall in and around Ap Bac with little effect.

As Vann watched the M113s withdraw and hold their positions to the west of the downed helicopters, he realized that the 7th Division was not going to close on Ap Bac before nightfall. With the afternoon waning and less than four hours of daylight left, Vann recommended to Colonel Dam that he request the 8th Airborne Battalion, an ARVN General Staff reserve unit, to drop to the east of Ap Bac, effectively closing the cordon. If the ARVN forces could not take Ap Bac, Vann reasoned, they could at least hold the PLAF in position until the ARVN could mass enough forces and firepower to close with and destroy them the following morning.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>284</sup>Ap Bac, 19.

<sup>285</sup>AAR, 15; Sheehan, 254.

<sup>286</sup>Ibid., 9.

Responding to Vann's recommendation, Dam radioed him that the airborne battalion would drop to the west of Ap Bac, thus facilitating link-up with the friendly units in the area. Incredulous, Vann returned to the division command post at Tan Hiep. On arrival, he found Brigadier General Tran Thien Kheim, the Chief of Staff of the ARVN General Staff, Colonel Daniel Porter, the American senior advisor for IV Corps, and General Huynh Van Cao, the IV Corps commander, in the command post with Colonel Dam. A Diem appointee, Cao had previously commanded the 7th Division. An extremely vain man, he thought himself to be a model of Napoleonic generalship.<sup>287</sup> Always carrying a swagger stick, Cao demonstrated his vanity by writing a novel he entitled *He Grows Under Fire*.<sup>288</sup> Earlier in April 1962, Cao expressed his confidence in both his abilities and the abilities of the 7th Division in an interview with the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* by stating: "The more [PLAF] that come the more we kill."<sup>289</sup>

Yet for all his expressed self-confidence, Cao was a man who hated combat:

He lacked the nerves of a soldier. During one operation when nervous strain undid him he ran out of the command tent, vomited, and ordered the artillery to stop firing a barrage in support of an infantry unit engaged with the guerrillas. The noise upset him too much, he said.<sup>290</sup>

Cao was also of a political nature and wished to remain in Diem's good graces.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>287</sup>Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 42; Sheehan, 76.

<sup>288</sup>Ibid.

<sup>289</sup>"Vietnamese Colonel Unworried," *Pacific Stars and Stripes* (24 April 1962). (Folder 9, box 2, unit 1, DPC).

<sup>290</sup>Sheehan, 76.

<sup>291</sup>Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 42; Sheehan, 78.

Shortly after the destruction of the ranger platoon in October 1962, Diem called Cao to Saigon. After waiting outside Diem's office for most of the day, Cao, upon entering the president's office, received a direct reprimand for taking too many casualties. Diem told Cao, then a colonel, that he had the potential to be a general, but his unit's suffering further heavy casualties would prevent his promotion. In the future, Diem said, Cao would have to be more cautious.<sup>292</sup> As a result, Cao repeatedly resisted American attempts to seek out aggressively and destroy the PLAF units.

His reluctance to engage the enemy manifested itself again, this time in the 7th Division's command post. Against the virulent protestations of both Vann and Porter, Cao decided at 1430 to employ the airborne to the west. With the memory of Diem's warnings about excessive casualties weighing upon him, the corps commander left open an avenue of egress for the PLAF once dusk fell.<sup>293</sup> With Cao's decision, the opportunity for the ARVN to turn defeat into victory passed.

About half an hour after Cao's fateful decision, Vann received word that another American advisor, Captain Good, had been seriously wounded. The senior advisor for 2/11 IN, Good was wounded in the fight near Ap Tan Thoi. Vann coordinated for a medevac, which arrived at 1525. One Huey, bearing Good and six Vietnamese wounded, arrived shortly thereafter at Tan Hiep, where Good perished.<sup>294</sup> The

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<sup>292</sup>Halberstam, 95; Sheehan, 120-121.

<sup>293</sup>Ibid; Karnow, 261-262; Sheehan, 258-259.

<sup>294</sup>AAR, 9.

Americans had lost three KIA in and around Ap Bac; the ARVN were to lose many more.

As the afternoon waned, activity other than the consistent artillery and airstrikes around Ap Bac and Ap Tan Thoi almost ceased. The ARVN units, wishing to prevent further losses, maintained their positions and waited for the 8th Airborne Battalion. With dusk imminent, seven C-123 aircraft dropped the paratroopers between Ap Tan Thoi and Ap Bac (see Figure 7). To the north, C1/514 engaged the dropping soldiers in the air and on the ground, inflicting casualties. The 8th Airborne Battalion was not the only unit to suffer troubles during the drop. Some of the newer guerrillas, having never seen paratroopers before, "were afraid and hid in the ditch and getting wet, [sic] their weapons did not work."<sup>295</sup> Although having difficulties of its own, the PLAF got the better of the exchange, cutting the paratroopers' formation into two smaller groups.<sup>296</sup> The airborne battalion's elements in the south, not under fire, took their time assembling, with paratroopers "standing up, getting out of parachutes, walking on dikes."<sup>297</sup>

With darkness now around him, the PLAF battalion commander realized that he did not have sufficient strength to hold off the numerous ARVN forces, nor did he believe he could withstand the ARVN assault that was sure to occur the next morning. He also took into account his men's condition. Fighting all day and running short of

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<sup>295</sup>Ap Bac, 21.

<sup>296</sup>Ibid.

<sup>297</sup>AAR, 10.

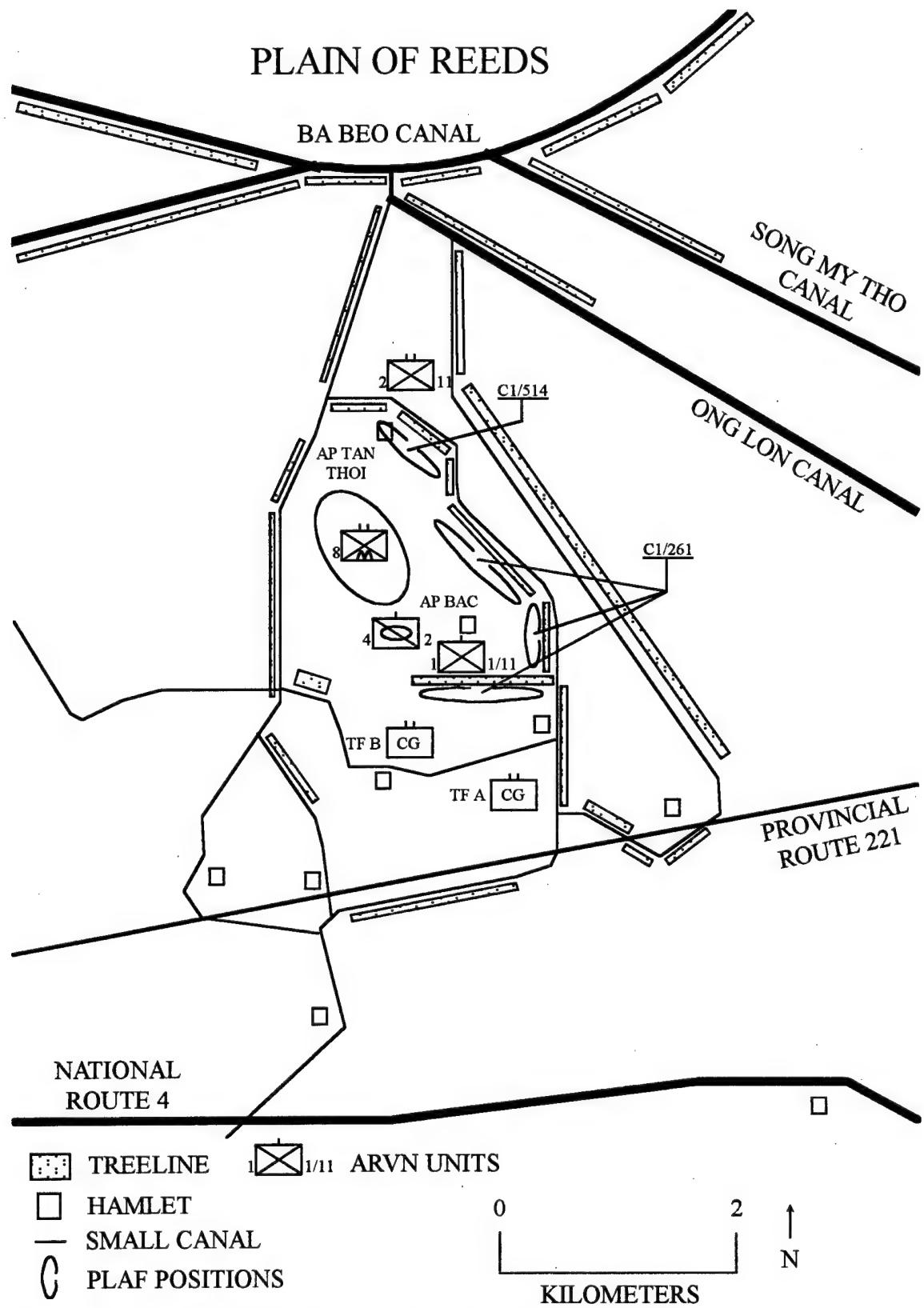


Figure 7. Map of ARVN Unit Locations, 1805 02 January 1963  
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ammunition, the "cadre and soldiers were hungry, thirsty, and tired."<sup>298</sup> As a result of consultations with the C1/514 commander, the battalion commander ordered the PLAF units to move to Ap Tan Thoi proper to prepare for a withdrawal to the east.<sup>299</sup>

At 1900, the final medevac and resupply flight came in just to the north of Ap Bac. Due to the number of wounded Vietnamese, Sergeant Deal and SP/4 Braman's bodies were not evacuated. To add insult to injury, immediately after the medevac, a friendly airstrike hit 2/11 IN causing an unknown number of casualties. Although the 7th Division had a flare ship on station over Ap Bac, the 8th's battalion commander requested that flares not be used. Cao concurred, allowing only harassment and interdiction fires against Ap Bac.<sup>300</sup>

As the ARVN units held their positions to wait for morning, the PLAF began its withdrawal to the east, taking advantage of the darkness and the opening Cao gave them. The battalion commander fixed the departure time at 2200. Withdrawing by platoons with elements of C1/261 leading, the guerrillas headed east to fight another day. With 2d Platoon, C1/514's departure from Ap Tan Thoi, the Battle of Ap Bac was essentially over, but events had not quite played themselves out.<sup>301</sup>

As 3 January 1963 dawned, helicopters began to fly into Ap Bac to evacuate the dead and wounded. Also arriving on the battlefield was Brigadier General Robert York,

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<sup>298</sup>Ap Bac, 24.

<sup>299</sup>Ibid., 22, 24.

<sup>300</sup>AAR, 10.

<sup>301</sup>Ap Bac, 25.

commander of a detachment charged with evaluating weapons and tactics. York was specifically interested in inspecting the downed UH-1B. When asked for his opinion of what happened, the general replied simply: "They [the PLAF] got away—that's what happened."<sup>302</sup>

Although ARVN units were now in the unoccupied hamlets of Ap Bac and Ap Tan Thoi, the 7th Division planned to conduct an attack to secure the area at 1200. At 1145, as York and his aide walked along a treeline to the helicopters, Major Tho's preparatory fires of either artillery or mortar rounds rained down around York, driving him to the ground but not injuring him. Another battalion from the 7th Division, the 1st Battalion, 10th Infantry, was not so lucky, suffering eight KIA and 14 WIA.<sup>303</sup>

As noon approached, the remaining ARVN units entered Ap Bac, which the after action report describes as "just a walk-thru."<sup>304</sup> With the PLAF already gone from the field, and the ARVN policing up their dead and wounded, the Battle of Ap Bac truly ended. Another battle was soon to begin, but between different belligerents: the U.S. government and the press.

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<sup>302</sup>Halberstam, 155.

<sup>303</sup>Ibid; AAR, 10.

<sup>304</sup>Ibid., 11.

## CHAPTER V

### THE AFTERMATH

The fight was rough at the outset, and the Government forces had more casualties than usual, but I don't understand how anyone can call the Ap Bac battle a defeat. The Government forces had an objective, they took that objective, the VC left and their casualties were greater than those of the Government forces-what more do you want?<sup>305</sup>

-General Paul Harkins, 30 January 1963

The fight at Ap Bac was not the most costly battle of the Second Indochina War, but it was certainly the most significant up to that point in the conflict. The ARVN had suffered many minor defeats at the hands of the PLAF before; the loss of the ranger platoon in October 1962 demonstrated the PLAF's growing tactical competence against the ARVN's air assaults. At that time, the PLAF engaged the rangers and surprised them, but the guerrillas withdrew shortly thereafter, choosing to break contact. At Ap Bac, whether by mistake or design, for the first time the PLAF stood its ground successfully against an air assault, artillery and CAS, and APCs. Outnumbered and outgunned, the insurgents inflicted numerous casualties upon the South Vietnamese and withdrew under pressure in good order, one of the most difficult of all military operations.

In terms of human and materiel loss at Ap Bac, the belligerents offered wildly different appraisals of the fighting. The PLAF claimed proudly 370 ARVN KIA or WIA;

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<sup>305</sup>"Ap Bac Was A Victory-Harkins Rebuffs Reports," *Times of Vietnam* (30 January 1963). (Folder 11, box 2, unit 1, DPC).

ten American KIA (among them Vann) and 9 WIA; three APCs; and eight helicopters at the expense of 18 KIA, 33 WIA, and three captured.<sup>306</sup> Reports by the Americans varied; Vann claimed three American KIA and six WIA; 63 ARVN KIA and 109 WIA, and five helicopters to an estimated 100 PLAF KIA while U.S. Army, Pacific (USARPAC), placed the losses at three American KIA and six WIA; 25 ARVN KIA and 100 WIA; and five helicopters but did not offer any estimates of PLAF losses.<sup>307</sup> One thing that both the PLAF and the American advisors agreed upon was that Ap Bac was a military defeat for the ARVN, a belief echoed by the press but contested by Harkins and Felt. How each group reacted to Ap Bac illustrated, to a certain extent, the level of its understanding of the situation in Vietnam.

#### The Initial Reactions

The PLAF believed itself the victor of Ap Bac both politically and militarily. On the political front, the PLAF noted the reactions among the civilians in the area, particularly the family members of those ARVN, CG, and SDC soldiers engaged at Ap Bac. Possibly influenced by PLAF cadres, by noon on the day of the battle, some 200 civilians demonstrated in the Cai Lay District capital. Wanting to see their spouses, the demonstrators ignored the district chief's orders to disperse and did not leave the capital until nightfall. This manifestation of civil discontent was not limited to Cai Lay District;

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<sup>306</sup>Ap Bac, 27.

<sup>307</sup>AAR, 13; Msg, CINCUSARPAC to AIG 931 et al., 040240ZJAN63. (Frame 187, reel 4, JFK).

at the same time, 300 family members demonstrated in front of the My Tho city hospital "against the death [sic] of their husbands." Both the police and the CG intervened to disperse the crowd forcibly, "thus causing much anger and hatred among the victims."<sup>308</sup>

The following day, 3 January, did not bring a reduction in emotions among the ARVN, CG, and SDC families. In Go Cong, spouses "poured" into the hospital to look for their relatives and bypassed the police barricade surrounding the morgue. Once again, the police sought to quell the disturbance, and the district chief, concerned for his safety, drove to Saigon, "because he did not dare to stay home."<sup>309</sup> With these demonstrations, the PLAF scored political victories against the GVN, particularly in the instances where the police or CG resorted to violence to disperse the crowds.

Not only did the PLAF believe it had won political gains at the local level, but it also saw success at the international level. Citing radio news reports, the PLAF noted "confusion among the imperialists." Radio stations from the United States, France, Britain, and Australia broadcast reports of the battle and credited the guerrillas with a victory. Even Beijing and Moscow admitted that the insurgents were making progress against the GVN. The PLAF viewed these political gains in hopeful terms. Ap Bac had the "effect of encouraging our people in their struggle and of urging them to obtain more and more successes until Final Victory. . . . The AP BAC victory was considered . . . as a great one which would encourage all Vietnamese people."<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>308</sup>Ap Bac, 31.

<sup>309</sup>Ibid.

<sup>310</sup>Ibid., 32.

The PLAF recognized Ap Bac's more tangible military results. The recently developed counter mopping up tactics were successful against the ARVN's overwhelming superiority of personnel and equipment. Calling the battle a "victorious counter mopping-up operation . . . [and] a great victory of our Armed Forces," the insurgents believed that "although the enemy employed a large strength of Air, Navy, Artillery, Armor and Infantry forces. . . . the enemy was bitterly defeated and suffered substantial losses," a claim based rightfully upon the ARVN's losses. The guerrillas also were successful in organizing an integrated command of three separate types of forces, a sign that the PLAF leadership had developed command and control procedures to incorporate effectively the regional, provincial, and local forces.<sup>311</sup>

The PLAF was not the only group to consider Ap Bac an ARVN defeat. The American advisors, most noticeably Vann and Colonel Porter, the senior advisor for IV Corps, believed the battle a failure for the ARVN. When asked by David Halberstam, then reporting for *The New York Times*, what had happened the day before, Vann kicked the dirt and said, "A miserable damn performance, just like always."<sup>312</sup> Putting it just as bluntly in his after action report, Vann wrote his superiors:

Because of the psychological and propaganda advantage gained from the publicity given (and exaggerated) by the US Press in discussing US helicopter and personnel losses, the known friendly casualties of 172, plus the failure of friendly forces to ever make [an] effective coordinated attack against the VC, this operation must be considered a *failure*.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>311</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>312</sup>William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 234-235.

<sup>313</sup>Underlined in the original. AAR, 18.

Porter agreed with Vann's assessment. Before forwarding Vann's report to his superiors, the IV Corps advisor attached a memorandum and called it "possibly the best documented, most comprehensive, most valuable, and most revealing of any of the reports submitted by III or IV Corps during the past 12 months."<sup>314</sup> The senior American advisors believed firmly that what had happened at Ap Bac was not an ARVN victory.

The American reporters in Vietnam, whether believing that the PLAF had won a stunning victory or seizing on the advisors' frustrations, portrayed the battle in rather foreboding terms. Halberstam's first article concerning the battle on 3 January 1963 called it "a major defeat," prompting the JCS to request of CINCPAC an "immediate report as to the veracity and full particulars if story authentic."<sup>315</sup> Portraying the battle in imagery-laden terms, his article the following day described Tho's mistaken shelling of Ap Bac and General York as a "nightmarish end to a nightmarish two days."<sup>316</sup>

To Halberstam, the battle was not simply a defeat for the ARVN but also a warning signal to the United States. His article of 4 January addressed a topic that reverberated throughout the American press: the ARVN's willingness to prosecute the war. He asserted that "[t]he Vietnamese regulars . . . lost the initiative from the first

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<sup>314</sup>Memo, Senior Advisor, IV Corps, to Chief, USASEC, subject: After Action Report - 2 Jan 63 Operation DUC THANG 1, 16 January 1963. (Folder 11, box 38, VSVWC).

<sup>315</sup>"Vietcong Downs Five U.S. Copters, Hits Nine Others," *The New York Times* (3 January 1963); Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 021322ZJAN63. (Frame 168, reel 4, *JFK*).

<sup>316</sup>"Vietnamese Reds Win Major Clash," *The New York Times* (4 January 1963).

moment and never showed much aggressive instinct and consequently suffered heavier casualties.”<sup>317</sup> Halberstam was not alone in his analysis; Neil Sheehan, writing for United Press International, submitted an article the same day that claimed “Americans criticized what they termed the ‘lack of aggressiveness’ of the Vietnamese commanders.”<sup>318</sup>

What the reporters in Vietnam were writing about Ap Bac and the ARVN did not go unnoticed by General Harkins. Two days after the battle, he summarized the reporters’ articles by writing in a confidential cable that “[a]s usual with press releases, some of the facts are correct--some are not.” After discussing the conduct of the battle, Harkins addressed the heart of the articles’ criticisms: the efficacy of the ARVN and the advisory system. Regarding Vann’s “miserable damn performance” remark, COMUSMACV admitted that it “can be taken either way. In some cases they [the ARVN] could have done better, and I think they should have.”<sup>319</sup>

Harkins then went on to concede a more telling point: “Our advisors were with the Vietnamese during the operation and in some cases their advice was heeded and in some cases it was not--*but it was par for the course* [emphasis added].” Yet to him, Ap Bac was just another battle against the PLAF, and, despite the analysis of the advisors present and the press, it was one that was relatively successful. In summing up, he wrote that “[l]ike any engagements in war, there are days--and there are days. This day they

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<sup>317</sup>Ibid.

<sup>318</sup>“Costly Viet-Nam Battle Angers US Advisers,” *The Washington Post* (4 January 1963).

<sup>319</sup>Msg, Harkins to Dodge, 4 January 1963. (Frames 197-198, reel 4, *JFK*).

[the ARVN] got a bear by the tail and they didn't let go of it. *At least they got most of it* [emphasis added]. Though some of the tail slipped away.”<sup>320</sup>

The American reporters in Vietnam continued the “lack of aggressiveness” theme during the following week. Halberstam reported that American advisors questioned their role in Vietnam because they felt “that what happened at Ap Bac goes far deeper than one battle and is directly tied to the question—whether the Vietnamese are really interested in having American advisors and listening to them.”<sup>321</sup> Sheehan was even more direct in his indictment of the ARVN by attributing the death of Captain Good, the senior advisor for 2/11 IN, to the timidity of the South Vietnamese soldiers:

Vietnamese infantrymen refused direct orders to advance during Wednesday's battle at Ap Bac and . . . an American Army captain was killed while out front pleading with them to attack. . . . One U.S. advisor said bitterly, ‘These people (the Vietnamese) won't listen—they make the same mistakes over and over again in the same way.’<sup>322</sup>

For the reporters in Vietnam, the burden of the defeat lay on the ARVN, not the American advisors. Indirectly, these reports questioned the validity of American policies in Vietnam.

Editorials in the United States echoed the field reporters' views and more directly called for a reassessment of American policy. One of the earliest analyses appeared on 5 January. Concerned mainly with the tactical conduct of Ap Bac, the editorial excused

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<sup>320</sup>Ibid. (Frames 199-200, reel 4, *JFK*).

<sup>321</sup>“Vietnam Defeat Shocks US Aides,” *The New York Times* (7 January 1963).

<sup>322</sup>“Vietnamese Ignored U.S. Battle Order,” *The Washington Post* (7 January 1963).

the advisors for the outcome of the battle, claiming that it was “through no fault of the participating Americans.” After describing the operation’s faults, the article turned to what it believed the most serious deficiency: “And most important of all, the South Vietnamese troops displayed some of the same basic faults they had demonstrated in other operations; they showed . . . little desire to attack.” In closing, the article called for a reassessment of American willingness to rely on technological advances to tip the scales in Vietnam. Indirectly criticizing the ARVN, it concluded that “machines-no matter how good-can help and supplement, but cannot replace . . . the man on the ground.”<sup>323</sup>

*The New York Times* again addressed ARVN effectiveness on 15 January. Reminding readers that “losses in one battle, or even a dozen battles, do not portend loss of the war in South Vietnam,” the editorial attacked not the American government but the South Vietnamese government. The trouble in Vietnam was not poor American policy but a “suspicious, dictatorial [South Vietnamese] government.” Preoccupied with “preserving itself in power,” the GVN “seriously hamper[ed] the spirit and effectiveness of the South Vietnamese military forces.” Instead of calling upon the Kennedy administration to reevaluate its policies in Vietnam, the editorial put the onus on the GVN, calling for the “need for stronger efforts in this direction [of democratic reforms].”<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> “Copters No Substitute for Men,” *The New York Times* (5 January 1963).

<sup>324</sup> “What’s Wrong in Vietnam,” *The New York Times* (15 January 1963).

Other editorials, while criticizing the ARVN's conduct at Ap Bac, also called for American introspection. On 8 January a *Times* editorial challenged the Kennedy administration's policies in Vietnam. Pointing out that former-Senator Kennedy had opposed assisting the French in 1954 because such an action was "doomed to failure," the article argued that the Vietnamese timidity at Ap Bac "confronts President Kennedy with the 1954 thesis of Senator Kennedy." Despite the critical tone of his article, the author conceded the difficulties facing the administration: "It will be very difficult for the President to find an alternative to the U.S. policy that has proved ineffectual and trends to deeper and deeper military involvement in Southeast Asia."<sup>325</sup>

*The Wall Street Journal* chose to challenge not the decision to fight in Vietnam, but a basic component of American culture: the "can-do spirit." Agreeing that the setbacks in Vietnam did not argue "against the strategic reasons for trying to keep the Communists from conquering South Vietnam," the editorial proposed astutely that the United States needed to reassess its efficacy in developing South Vietnam and recognize the limits of American influence: "And perhaps we should all realize that there are certain things the U.S., for all its military power, cannot do. One is to reshape the nature of peoples of radically different traditions and values."<sup>326</sup>

While the press questioned American policies and South Vietnamese efficacy, Harkins and Admiral Felt, CINCPAC, offered their own assessments of the ARVN

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<sup>325</sup>"Kennedy's Foresight of the Events at Ap Bac," *The New York Times* (8 January 1963).

<sup>326</sup>"War Without Will," *The Wall Street Journal* (10 January 1963).

soldier and the war in Vietnam. By the 10th, Harkins had had his fill of the media's portrayal of the ARVN and released an official statement to the press. In it, he expressed concern "over recent allegations critical of the valor and courage of the Vietnamese soldier." Harkins cited the deaths of "approximately ten thousand Vietnamese" throughout 1962 as proof of their willingness to prosecute the war. Coming to the ARVN's defense, COMUSMACV accused those who were critical of "the fighting qualities of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam" of doing a "disservice to the thousands of gallant and courageous men who are fighting so well in defense of their country." Regarding the American advisors, Harkins was laudatory as well, proclaiming "them among the best ever assembled."<sup>327</sup> Excerpts from this statement soon found their way into *The New York Herald Tribune* and *The New York Times*.<sup>328</sup>

Yet Harkins' statement missed the thrust of the press's criticisms. While critical of the Vietnamese soldiers' unwillingness to attack, the American reporters in Vietnam believed that the deeper problem lay with the ARVN leadership. Harkins tacitly acknowledged a leadership problem within Task Force A by writing in his confidential cable on the 4th that the CG unit "had lost . . . [its] commander due to wounds and no one seemed to want to take over," but he did not address this significant shortcoming in

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<sup>327</sup>Msg, COMUSMACV to JCS, 100830ZJAN63 (Frame 203, reel 4, *JFK*).

<sup>328</sup>"'Courageous' Vietnamese Praised by Gen Harkins," *The New York Herald Tribune* (10 January 1963). (Folder 4, box 3, unit 2, DPC); "Harkins Praises Vietnam Troops," *The New York Times* (11 January 1963).

his press release. He chose instead to focus on the more emotional topic of ARVN unwillingness to engage in hand to hand combat with the PLAF, perhaps a more easily defended issue.<sup>329</sup>

Halberstam, writing the next day, seized on Harkins' omission. The reporter readily asserted that "the Vietnamese soldier is just as good as the people want him to be." Instead, the issue in Vietnam was that the American advisors considered the ARVN soldier "to be poorly led and feel that the greatest gap at present is in field leaders and NCOs." The advisors and the press did not doubt the fighting abilities of the soldiers but rather the officers, since "Americans here [Vietnam] feel real affection and respect for the Vietnamese private."<sup>330</sup>

Admiral Felt also lent his support to Harkins' confidence in the GVN. Arriving in Vietnam a week after Ap Bac to confer with COMUSMACV, Felt offered his view of the battle to reporters who met him on his arrival. Responding to Neil Sheehan's request that he offer his assessment, the admiral replied that he did not believe what he had read in the papers. Contrary to the news reports, Ap Bac "was a Vietnamese victory-not a defeat as the papers say."<sup>331</sup>

CINCPAC was not only sure of a Vietnamese victory at Ap Bac, but he also believed in total GVN victory, proclaiming that "I am confident the Vietnamese are

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<sup>329</sup>Msg, Harkins to Dodge, 4 January 1963 (Frame 199, reel 4, *JFK*).

<sup>330</sup>Ibid.

<sup>331</sup>Prochnau, 239.

going to win their war.”<sup>332</sup> Despite the “recent casualties suffered by Vietnamese forces at Ap Bac [which were] . . . a bad accident,” the war in Vietnam was “taking a generally favorable course.”<sup>333</sup> En route to Honolulu, Felt told reporters at a Taipei press conference that the PLAF were “getting licked.”<sup>334</sup> COMUSMACV and CINCPAC did not share the lower level advisors’ and the press’s beliefs that Ap Bac held special significance, but they all shared a desire to explain Ap Bac’s outcome. Tactically, they needed to look no farther than the principles of war and a combat power analysis.

### Combat Power Analysis

As discussed above, the principles of war were (and remain) an integral part of the Army’s doctrine. Never far from a commander’s decision-making process, the principles of war offer an insight into the ARVN’s defeat at Ap Bac, particularly the principles of mass, security, surprise, and unity of command.<sup>335</sup> Despite the 7th Division’s overwhelming numerical superiority, Colonel Dam was unable to mass his forces in a coordinated attack. While lack of aircraft and the ground fog at Tan Hiep prevented 2/11 IN from landing all of its units simultaneously, these factors did not contribute to the South Vietnamese defeat.

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<sup>332</sup> “Felt Sees Defeat of Vietnam Reds,” *The New York Times* (12 January 1963).

<sup>333</sup> “War on Communists Effective Despite Setbacks Felt Says,” United States Information Service, Release FEF6 (16 January 1963). (Folder 11, box 2, unit 1, DPC).

<sup>334</sup> “Vietnamese Winning the War Against the Reds, Adm. Felt Says,” *Pacific Stars and Stripes* (16 January 1963). (Folder 11, box 2, unit 1, DPC).

<sup>335</sup> See Appendix C for definitions.

What did prevent the ARVN from massing its forces was its inability to coordinate subordinate units. Although converging on Ap Bac on three separate axes (north-2/11 IN, west-4/2 ACR, and south-Task Forces A and B), Dam's division and its supporting units did not come together in a timely manner. The disjointed actions of the ARVN units, particularly 4/2 ACR in the west and Task Forces A and B in the south, allowed the PLAF to reposition its forces as needed. Not pressed to his front, the PLAF commander moved some of his guerrillas from the vicinity of Ap Tan Thoi to the north, thus frustrating 2/11 IN's efforts to cross the canal and enter the village. Along the same lines, despite the proximity of Task Force B to 4/2 ACR, the M113s charged the woodline to the east of Ap Bac without dismounted infantry support, inviting PLAF attacks against individual carriers and resulting in the loss of two vehicles. Regardless of the 7th Division's troop strength, the uncoordinated efforts of its subordinate units did not allow the division commander to mass his forces against the smaller PLAF foe.

The ARVN at Ap Bac also suffered from not ensuring the security or the surprise of the pending operation. Despite Dam's precautions of allowing only a small cell plan the operation and issuing his order the night before the operation, the PLAF had already divined the ARVN's intentions.<sup>336</sup> With Diem's birthday on the 3d, the guerrillas predicted a large operation in honor of the South Vietnamese president. The PLAF observed the massing of ARVN forces over a two day period beginning on 1 January 1963. The 7th Division had not been subtle in preparing for DUC THANG 1 and did

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<sup>336</sup>AAR, 15; *Ap Bac*, 7.

little to camouflage its movements. Even the naval deployments in the early morning of the 2d indicated the division's intentions and spurred the PLAF to deploy for battle.<sup>337</sup> Through their inability to disguise their intentions, the South Vietnamese commanders lost an important psychological advantage by allowing the guerrillas to prepare themselves mentally for the fight. With this mental preparation, the PLAF perhaps developed a resolve to stand and fight at Ap Bac that it might not have enjoyed had it been surprised.

DUC THANG 1, both in concept and execution, violated several principles of war, but the most grievous was the failure to ensure unity of command. The Dinh Tuong Regiment, although comprised of ARVN assets, was not under the direct command of Colonel Dam because of Major Tho's status as a province chief. The greater portion of combat assets committed to Ap Bac, therefore, was not truly under the division commander's control. Dam's most mobile and lethal asset, 4/2 ACR, did not respond quickly to his directives to assist the reserve company near Ap Bac, resulting in needless 1/1/11 IN casualties.

Along the same lines and contrary to his orders, Task Force B, located on the flank of the PLAF positions and situated perfectly to clear the east-west woodline and relieve Task Force A, did not attack because Major Tho would not order it. Even within the 7th Division itself, some units did not respond to the division commander's orders. In summing up Dam's inability to unify his units' actions, the American advisors

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<sup>337</sup>Ibid., 7, 10.

attributed part of the ARVN defeat to “[a] complete lack of discipline in battle that permits commanders at all levels, and even private soldiers, to refuse to obey any orders they personally find distasteful.”<sup>338</sup> From a principle of war standpoint, it is not surprising that Ap Bac resulted in an ARVN defeat.

A more telling conclusion results from a combat power analysis. Although the 1962 version of *Operations* does not specify combat power’s components as firepower, maneuver, protection, and leadership, contemporary Army courses at the company and field grade levels incorporated them in doctrinal instruction.<sup>339</sup> Concerning the use of firepower, the 7th Division did not make the best use of its resources. Despite the number of artillery pieces and aircraft in support, the ARVN never integrated the available fire support into the operation. Throughout the fight, mortar and artillery fires and CAS rained into and around Ap Bac with little effect on the PLAF. A portion of this inefficacy stemmed from the lack of artillery forward observers (FOs) and the training deficiencies of both FOs and forward air controllers (FACs). Both task forces in the south failed to bring their FOs with them, resulting in artillery fires that were not properly directed. The RVNAF FOs and FACs that were present were unable to

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<sup>338</sup>AAR, 19.

<sup>339</sup>See Appendix D for definitions. General William B. Rosson, U.S. Army (Retired), Salem, VA, to author, Lubbock, TX, 16 September 1997. Author’s collection, Lubbock, TX.

coordinate or control properly the assets at their disposal, resulting in ineffective artillery and airstrikes.<sup>340</sup>

The South Vietnamese forces also failed to use the flare ship that was available to illuminate the battlefield, allowing the PLAF to withdraw unmolested in the darkness. Despite Vann's recommendation to fire approximately 500 rounds against the withdrawing guerrillas, Dam decided to fire only 100 during the hours of darkness. By the next morning, only some 45 rounds actually had impacted around Ap Bac.<sup>341</sup> Worse yet, in at least two cases, on the evening of the 2d and the morning of the 3d, uncoordinated fires resulted in fratricide and numerous ARVN casualties. The 7th Division's actions at Ap Bac suffered considerably from a lack of coordinated mortar and artillery fires and CAS.

Maneuver, or more appropriately the lack of it, played a key role in the South Vietnamese defeat at Ap Bac. Maneuver relies on a unit's ability to fire and move: "Fire without movement is indecisive. Exposed movement without fire is disastrous."<sup>342</sup> The attack by 4/2 ACR into the woodline east of Ap Bac was certainly the latter. Despite the carriers' speed and heavy armament, the mechanized company could not conduct a successful attack because its suppressive fires were not effective. The gunners, seeking protection in the cupola rings, fired wildly into the woodlines without aiming their

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<sup>340</sup>Major Jack Macslarrow, U.S. Army, My Tho, to Major Lam Quang Tho, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, My Tho, 3 January 1963. (Folder 11, box 38, VSVWC); AAR, 18-19.

<sup>341</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>342</sup>Marshall, 223.

weapons. Any hope of suppressing the PLAF in its holes was lost, and, consequently, the guerrillas were able to leave their holes and engage the carriers individually. Further, instead of dismounting infantry near Task Force B and allowing it to clear the woodline, Ba charged ahead, leaving his right flank completely exposed. Failing to use the terrain and ensuring suppressive fires to neutralize the PLAF, 4/2 ACR's, and the 7th Division's, attack failed.

The defeat at Ap Bac resulted not only from ARVN failures to mass firepower and ensure maneuver but also from the lack of protection for the soldiers. Both task forces in the south advanced through rice paddies that offered no cover or concealment. When Task Force A made contact with the guerrillas, its soldiers were exposed to the PLAF fire with nothing to protect them. Pinned down with nowhere to move, the Civil Guardsmen took heavy casualties. Even the M113 crewmen had little protection from the PLAF small arms fire. Because the vehicles' commanders had no armor protection while manning the .50 caliber machine guns, they also took heavy casualties, despite being aboard the carriers. The 7th Division was unable to preserve its combat power through protecting its soldiers.

Combat power's "most essential" element is leadership, for it "provide[s] purpose, direction, and motivation in combat," and it was among the ARVN leadership that the greatest failings at Ap Bac occurred.<sup>343</sup> One of the most glaring faults was the lack of senior leadership at Ap Bac. Vann, as a lieutenant colonel, was the most senior

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<sup>343</sup>Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), 2-21.

of all officers in and around the battlefield. The highest ranking ARVN officers present were captains; none of the senior ARVN commanders, including the division commander, the Dinh Tuong Regiment commander, or the 2/11 IN commander were present. Acting solely on reports from their subordinates, these South Vietnamese leaders made their decisions in the safety and comfort of their command posts without observing the battlefield.

After the battle, Vann indicted the "system of command that never places a Vietnamese Officer above the rank of Captain either on or over the battlefield."<sup>344</sup> Despite Ba's personal leadership of 4/2 ACR's attack at Ap Bac, Vann was not impressed with the mechanized commander's performance. The American was so incensed over the actions of Tho and Ba that he recommended that "a Board of Inquiry . . . determine their fitness to retain their commands."<sup>345</sup> One wonders how Ba might have reacted differently had Tho been pinned down with Task Force A.

Another disturbing facet of the ARVN leaders' performance was their apparent lack of aggressiveness in taking the fight to the enemy. Agreeing with the American newsmen concerning the South Vietnamese officers, Vann discussed the "reluctance of ARVN Commanders at all levels . . . to close with and destroy the enemy," citing the drop of the 8th Airborne Battalion to the west as proof of his assertion.<sup>346</sup> Vann was not

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<sup>344</sup>AAR, 18.

<sup>345</sup>AAR, 20.

<sup>346</sup>Ibid., 18.

the only American advisor present at Ap Bac to make this observation. Major Macslarrow, Tho's advisor, also wrote that a

seven-hour period elapsed during which no attack was initiated, despite my [Macslarrow's] continual advice to do so. . . . The American Advisor who accompanied Task Force "ALPHA", later informed me that an attack by his unit could have readily been accomplished after the Division Reserve . . . had been committed.<sup>347</sup>

It seemed that the reporters were not the only Americans in Vietnam who doubted the ARVN officers' abilities to prosecute the war.

More damning was Colonel Porter's evaluation of the ARVN leadership at Ap Bac. Of the 15 ARVN weaknesses he noted, 14 of them were related to functions of command. Echoing Vann's remarks, Porter condemned the "[f]ailure of the Corps, Division, Regimental and Sector commanders to go to the battlefield to direct, supervise and observe the actions of subordinate commanders and participating units." Porter not only indicted the senior South Vietnamese leadership for its absence from Ap Bac but also ARVN leaders at all levels for their failure to mass combat power in accordance with doctrine. He cited the "[f]ailure of commanders at all echelons to act decisively, to control and direct their available firepower, and to employ the principles of fire and maneuver to assault or outflank enemy positions." Worse, the ARVN officers did not provide one of the most basic functions of command, motivation in combat. Porter described the deficiencies as a "[f]ailure . . . to instill in their subordinates . . . a will to

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<sup>347</sup>Major Jack Macslarrow, U.S. Army, My Tho, to Major Lam Quang Tho, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, My Tho, 3 January 1963. (Folder 11, box 38, VSVWC).

win, a fighting spirit and dedication to duty, by bold, daring, courageous, [and] aggressive action.”<sup>348</sup>

One of the greatest shortcomings Porter noted concerned the ARVN’s inability “to pin-point offenders and to fix responsibilities for ineffective and irresponsible leadership, and failure to take action to eliminate such individuals.” Yet what made the senior corps advisor’s memorandum so troubling was not so much the long list of ARVN failures but the fact that the deficiencies were recurring problems. These were not one-time faults that the advisors expected to correct before the next large operation; to the contrary, Porter prefaced his comments by noting that the weaknesses occurred “in the bulk of other operations in the old III Corps as well as in the new IV Corps.”<sup>349</sup> Porter identified one of the root problems the Americans faced in Vietnam: how to prevent the ARVN from suffering from the same mistakes again and again. In the wake of the tremors at Ap Bac, one would expect the belligerents to examine closely their conduct of the war and make changes accordingly. In some instances, tactics and procedures changed, but neither the Vietnamese nor the Americans altered the larger issues of doctrine or policy.

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<sup>348</sup>Memo, Senior Advisor, IV Corps, to Chief, USASEC, subject: After Action Report - 2 Jan 63 Operation DUC THANG 1, 16 January 1963. (Folder 11, box 38, VSVWC).

<sup>349</sup>Ibid.

### Changes in Tactics, Doctrine, and Policy

For the PLAF, Ap Bac provided an opportunity to proclaim its strength and ability to stand up to the ARVN. Party historians wrote that the battle “marked the maturity of the South Vietnamese Liberation Army in organization, tactics, [and] political work.”<sup>350</sup> The guerrillas were not the “raggedy-ass little bastards” that some American advisors believed them to be; to the contrary, the PLAF ably demonstrated its combat abilities against a larger and technologically advanced foe.<sup>351</sup>

The battle also allowed the cadres to assess the effectiveness of their counter mopping-up tactics. Not surprisingly, the guerrillas thought their tactics to be the antidote to the ARVN sweeps, but they also believed that they could not abandon guerrilla warfare, particularly since the GVN continued to possess such strength. Consequently, the PLAF leadership directed after Ap Bac that “the main concept of friendly counter mop up tactic[s] . . . continue[s] to be ‘*Counter mop-up guerrilla warfare.*’<sup>352</sup> Capitalizing on its victory at Ap Bac, the PLAF also instituted the “Apbac emulation drive in killing enemy troops and performing feats of arms,” an effort to inspire other guerrilla units to inflict defeats upon the GVN.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>350</sup>Le Hong Linh et al., 16.

<sup>351</sup>Sheehan, 204.

<sup>352</sup>Underlined in original. *Ap Bac*, 39.

<sup>353</sup>Le Hong Linh et al., 16.

By emphasizing the guerrilla nature of the coming battles against the GVN, the PLAF also continued to embrace the protracted nature of its struggle. Despite the hope Ap Bac brought the PLAF, the Lao Dong cautioned its Southern brethren not to forget the potential long-term struggle ahead: “Although the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam is still developing strongly in the political, economic, and military fields, the path of the South Vietnamese revolution is still a circuitous, tortuous, long, and arduous path.”<sup>354</sup> In short, Ap Bac increased the PLAF’s confidence in its tactics and confirmed its beliefs in a protracted struggle. Otherwise, the battle brought little else to the guerrillas, particularly in the way of policy changes.

Like their opponents, the Americans and Vietnamese also evaluated, at least to some degree, the tactics used at Ap Bac. One of the most troubling facets of the battle was the PLAF effectiveness against the M113s. The high number of vehicle crew casualties and the unwillingness of the soldiers to fully expose themselves while firing the carriers’ machine guns was a source of numerous comments in after action reports. Vann recommended that “[a] metal shield must be placed on the H-113 and H-114 [sic] around the Cal 50 machine gun to give protection to the gunner, otherwise the weapons will not be used in critical situations.”<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>354</sup>Minh Tranh, “The South Vietnamese Revolution Must Be Protracted, Arduous, and Complex but Will Be Victorious,” trans. unknown, *Hoc Tap* (February 1963): 14. (Folder 11, box 2, unit 1, DPC).

<sup>355</sup>AAR, 19.

Shortly thereafter, 2d ACR (4/2 ACR's higher headquarters) fabricated gun shields for the carriers' cupolas using soft steel plating. The crewmen soon found out that the shields, made from a sunken ship's hull, could be penetrated rather easily.<sup>356</sup> Faced with this unfortunate discovery, the 80th Ordnance Depot fashioned 46 new shields from salvaged vehicles. Throughout the remainder of 1963, ordnance technicians fitted shields for the rest of the carriers in Vietnam. By early 1964, soldiers received M113s with gun shields already mounted, a legacy of the PLAF's victory at Ap Bac.<sup>357</sup>

The poor relationship between MACV and the press was another legacy of the battle. Although bad feelings between the two had gained momentum throughout the latter portion of 1962, Ap Bac brought matters to a head. The lower echelon advisors' comments about the ARVN's performance, Harkins' belief that the battle was an ARVN victory, and Felt's parting shot at a newsman to "[g]et on the team" all served to aggravate an already strained relationship.<sup>358</sup> Despite MACV's establishment of military information officers at the four corps tactical zone headquarters "to serve as the eyes and ears" of its Office of Information, improved communications to supplement the usually terse operational summaries with additional information, and weekly press conferences, the damage had been done. Where before Ap Bac the press was "relatively agreeable,"

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<sup>356</sup>Department of the Army, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 38.

<sup>357</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>358</sup>Karnow cites Peter Arnett (Associated Press) as the recipient of Felt's barb; Prochnau claims Malcom Browne (Associated Press). Karnow, 262; Prochnau, 244.

after the fight they became convinced that MACV was lying to them, a feeling that became more emotional with time.<sup>359</sup>

The press was not the only party to harbor bad feelings about Ap Bac. Despite later accounts that portrayed Vann as quite friendly with the press, the 7th Division's senior advisor resented the reporters' portrayal of what occurred at Ap Bac. As he wrote his superiors, the newsmen were a "perplexing problem." Not only did they arrive in fatigues, but they "got invited into the CP [command post] area thru their previous acquaintanceships with US personnel who were too polite to order them out." Most damaging was their skewed reports of the fighting. Relying on accounts from aircrews who had "limited knowledge" of the engagements, the reporters "exaggerated the friendly failures, [and] maximized the enemy's favorable actions." Disgusted, he recommended that "control and/or censorship be imposed for all correspondents."<sup>360</sup> Quite astutely, John Mecklin, the embassy's Chief of Public Affairs, observed that "[a] man from Mars . . . could have been excused if he got the impression that the newsmen, as well as the VC, were the enemy."<sup>361</sup>

Aside from the mounting of gun shields and an increased animosity between MACV and the press, the Americans and South Vietnamese changed little in response to

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<sup>359</sup>Department of the Army, *The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* by William Hammond. The U.S. Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988), 37-38.

<sup>360</sup>AAR, 20.

<sup>361</sup>John Mecklin, *Mission in Torment: An Intimate Account of the U.S. Role in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 114.

Ap Bac. One area that the Americans scrutinized but changed little concerned the procedures for downed aircrews. Since three of the five helicopters lost at Ap Bac were the direct result of attempting to retrieve already downed helicopter crews, Vann recommended that the 45th Transportation Battalion (the 93d Transportation Company's higher headquarters) review its procedures.<sup>362</sup> Porter, recognizing these rescue attempts as "courageous," also recommended that the transportation battalion evaluate the effectiveness of its evacuation techniques.<sup>363</sup>

Even General Harkins initially believed that "[i]t took a lot of guts" for the pilots to attempt an evacuation, but MACV needed to "review whether we are on the right track in going in after downed helicopters particularly when it is in the middle of a battle area."<sup>364</sup> Yet for all the recommendations to reevaluate rescue tactics, little changed. Despite pressure by the press and the White House, evacuation procedures remained unaltered. When asked in late January whether any procedural changes were in the making, Harkins denied any such activity, claiming that "nothing indicates the need for such a change of tactics."<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>362</sup>AAR, 20.

<sup>363</sup>Memo, Senior Advisor, IV Corps, to Chief, USASEC, subject: After Action Report - 2 Jan 63 Operation DUC THANG 1, 16 January 1963. (Folder 11, box 38, VSVWC).

<sup>364</sup>Msg, Harkins to Dodge, 4 January 1963. (Frame 198, reel 4, *JFK*).

<sup>365</sup>"Ap Bac Was A Victory-Harkins Rebuffs Reports," *Times of Vietnam* (30 January 1963). (Folder 11, box 2, unit 1, DPC).

Another area requiring improvement yet receiving little attention involved medical treatment for ARVN battle casualties. Vann highlighted the shortcomings in the ARVN medical procedures, noting that “there had been little planning or preparation.” Despite the number of South Vietnamese medical personnel, “[e]ven the barest of first aid . . . was not administered” to the ARVN wounded. Offering his observation that “[i]t is evident the medical personnel require much training,” Vann identified a problem that was to plague the South Vietnamese soldiers for the duration of the war.<sup>366</sup>

Despite the advisors’ public and private criticisms of the advisory system, the MAAG’s role (and, later, MACV’s when it absorbed the MAAG in 1964) remained unchanged. Although MACV studies offered possible solutions to the Americans’ authority problems over the South Vietnamese, including a joint command structure, U.S. advisors remained just that, advisors. After assuming MACV’s command in 1964, General William C. Westmoreland affirmed his belief that advisors were “to appraise the situation and . . . give sound advice.” The command emphasis on upbeat reports was also clear, since COMUSMACV directed his field advisors to “accentuate the positive, and . . . work out solutions to [their] problems in [a] dynamic way!”<sup>367</sup> Even the advisors’ training remained poor. As late as 1969, training consisted only of the

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<sup>366</sup>AAR, 13.

<sup>367</sup>Department of the Army, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* by Jeffrey Clarke. The U.S. Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988), 58-59.

Advisory Course that still did not include any Vietnamese language or cultural instruction.<sup>368</sup>

COMUSMACV's command relationship with CINCPAC also came under Washington's scrutiny, but the examination came to nothing. In early February 1963, the State Department suggested that General Harkins report directly to the JCS instead of through PACOM. Citing CINCPAC's interference in MACV's affairs, W. Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, wrote to General Maxwell D. Taylor, CJCS, "that there would be a substantial benefit if General Harkins . . . report directly to the Chiefs of Staff. . . . We have too much at stake to permit the sensitivity of command procedures to interfere with the most direct and effective channels."<sup>369</sup> Taylor responded five days later that he had initiated a Joint Staff study that would focus on Harriman's chain of command concerns.

After the staff completed its study some two months later, Taylor and Harriman discussed its findings in the CJCS's office. The chairman pointed out that the directive governing Harkins' mission in Vietnam "gave Harkins adequate authority to deal with local incidents and to conduct the campaign as he saw fit without further specific guidance from higher headquarters." In essence, there was no reason to remove PACOM from MACV's reporting chain. Despite Harriman's appearance of being

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<sup>368</sup>Charles Shaugnessy, National Archives, interview by author, 24 July 1997, Lubbock, TX, telephonic interview, Lubbock, TX, to College Park, MD.

<sup>369</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. III, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 114.

"reasonably well satisfied," he "reserved the right to reopen the matter if...in his judgment," the relationship no longer supported MACV's needs.<sup>370</sup> MACV remained a PACOM subordinate command for the duration of the American involvement in Vietnam.

The ARVN officers' weaknesses in training and aggressiveness also continued to plague American efforts to make the South Vietnamese officer corps successful in prosecuting the war. Before his departure from Vietnam, Colonel Porter offered his commentary on the problems facing the ARVN leadership. Acknowledging that "[t]remendous progress has been made . . . in the fields of leadership and command since 1 January 1962," the departing senior advisor for IV Corps identified profound deficiencies in the South Vietnamese application of American doctrine, both in tactics and aggressiveness. He cautioned his superiors that

[t]here seems to be an almost universal lack of understanding . . . on the principles of fire and movement, and in the principles of fire and maneuver. . . . This matter is constantly stressed and emphasized throughout the entire advisory organization, but little or no progress has been noted. . . . One of the greatest weaknesses in GVN commanders...is the failure to pursue the VC as they withdraw.<sup>371</sup>

Not surprisingly, Vann also offered critical commentary on the ARVN leadership as he rotated back to the United States. Concerned about the South Vietnamese officers' unwillingness to respond to American advice, he enclosed a sample written

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<sup>370</sup>Ibid., 196.

<sup>371</sup>Memo, Senior Advisor, IV Corps, to Commanding General, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, subject: Final Report, 13 February 1963. (CMH).

critique for Vietnamese counterparts with his final report. He suggested to his superiors that “[i]t has been my experience that oral critiques to counterparts are largely ignored or forgotten,” an intimation of the difficulties in bringing about ARVN change, and observed that “it appears both ridiculous and wasteful to have advisors here and not have them utilized.”<sup>372</sup>

Problems with the political nature of the ARVN leadership did not lessen after Porter’s and Vann’s departures. In an effort to explore his options concerning the senior South Vietnamese leadership, General Westmoreland commissioned a MACV study in early 1965 to suggest recommendations to improve the professionalism of the officer corps. The study’s findings were bleak and described the “power appetite and irresponsibility of several of the VN senior officers.” Despite the South Vietnamese armed forces’ organizational structure, the military juntas were the “focal point of power within the RVNAF,” not the Joint General Staff. One later study went so far as to suggest establishing a “coup inhibitor”: each general officer would receive a trust account of between \$5,000 and \$20,000. For each month the officer did not involve himself in political plotting, MACV would deposit another \$250 to \$1,000 in the account. While the plan did not receive much serious attention, it illustrates the

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<sup>372</sup>Memo, Senior Advisor, 7th Infantry Division and 41st Tactical Zone, to Chief, U.S. Army Section, Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, subject: Senior Advisor’s Final Report, 1 April 1963. (Folder 11, box 38, VSVWC).

desperation MACV was approaching in transforming the ARVN officer corps into a professional organization.<sup>373</sup>

Doctrinally, the ARVN remained focused on conventional warfare. Throughout MACV's dabbling in anti-guerrilla tactics and counterinsurgency advice, its expectations of a conventional force bringing about victory in South Vietnam remained. During a proposed expansion of the ARVN in 1966, Westmoreland answered a recommendation from the American embassy to concentrate the new forces on counterinsurgency warfare with the retort: "It takes a conventionally organized military force to fight VC main forces as well as guerrillas."<sup>374</sup> Failing to recognize the political dimensions of the Second Indochina War, MACV held to its penchant for the conventional approach.

The larger policies in Vietnam remained static as well. Within six months after Ap Bac, the JCS and the White House received two separate reports concerning American policies in Vietnam, both of which generally supported MACV's programs. One team, headed by Army Chief of Staff Earle G. Wheeler, visited Vietnam in late January 1963 and was charged to "form a military judgment as to the prospects for a successful conclusion of the conflict in a reasonable period of time."<sup>375</sup> After visiting 12 different locations in Vietnam, the team offered minor recommendations but was confident in the current course chosen by the administration and MACV:

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<sup>373</sup>Department of the Army, *Advice and Support*, 81-82.

<sup>374</sup>Ibid., 149-150.

<sup>375</sup>Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army, "Report of Visit by Joint Chiefs of Staff Team to South Vietnam," 109/63. (Folder 11, box 2, unit 1, DPC).

The situation in South Vietnam has been reoriented . . . from a circumstance of near desperation to a condition where victory is now a hopeful prospect. This leads to the conclusion that the current support program in Vietnam is adequate, and should be retained. . . [W]e are slowly winning in the present thrust, and . . . *there is no compelling reason to change*. . . [U]nless the Viet Cong chooses to escalate the conflict, *the principal ingredients for eventual success have been assembled in South Vietnam* [emphasis added].<sup>376</sup>

Visiting Vietnam in the wake of Ap Bac, the team found no reason for changing American policy, despite the lower advisors' concerns.

By the end of June 1963, one of the Wheeler team's members, Major General Victor Krulak, was back in Vietnam. As the Joint Staff's Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities, Krulak was intimately familiar with the situation in Vietnam. Speaking in a meeting of the President's Special Group for Counterinsurgency, Krulak stated in February 1963 that "real progress . . . [had] been made in the struggle against the Viet Cong."<sup>377</sup> The general maintained this outlook in his report, issued in early July 1963: "The counterinsurgency campaign is moving forward on the military and economic fronts. There is reason for optimism in both of these areas. . . . Military operations are more effective. . . . *[O]ur present course is sound and that, absolutely pursued, it will see the job done* [emphasis added]."<sup>378</sup> Within six months after Ap Bac, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the White House received two separate reports, one headed by the Army Chief of Staff and the other by the Joint

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<sup>376</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. III, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 91-94.

<sup>377</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>378</sup>Ibid., 456, 465.

Staff's counterinsurgency expert, confirming the administration's and MACV's current policies as effective. Both offered optimistic appraisals and visions of victory in Vietnam. Despite all that Ap Bac demonstrated, one must wonder how this happened.

Many factors are involved in this interesting phenomenon, but one of the most important variables was COMUSMACV, General Harkins. As the senior military officer in Vietnam, his perceptions and beliefs certainly carried the most weight with visitors to Vietnam and decisionmakers in Washington. Harkins was a self-proclaimed optimist, a fact that was not lost on his staff or subordinates. Shortly after taking command of MACV, a *Time* cover story quoted him as saying: "I am an optimist, and I am not going to allow my staff to be pessimistic."<sup>379</sup> For a young staff officer or advisor, such a statement must have had some effect on how they conducted their business. COMUSMACV echoed these sentiments less than two weeks before Ap Bac. He expressed his confusion about the media's penchant for criticizing the GVN's and MACV's policies by stating that he didn't "know why people continue to be pessimistic. I know, since I have been here, things have gotten so much better."<sup>380</sup>

Harkins continued his optimistic appraisals after Ap Bac as well. His "Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam," forwarded to CINCPAC in late January 1963, was based on the assumption that the insurgency would be under control within three years, or the end of 1965. By this time, COMUSMACV anticipated the GVN's progress

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<sup>379</sup>"To Liberate from Oppression," *Time* LXXIX (11 May 1962): 28.

<sup>380</sup>"Gen. Harkins Notes Big Strides in Vietnam War," *Pacific Stars and Stripes* (22 December 1962). (Folder 10, box 2, unit 1, DPC).

would support reducing the MAAG's strength by one half after fiscal year 1965 and the complete elimination of both MACV and Headquarters, Support Activity, Saigon (HSAS), the major support command headquarters in Vietnam.<sup>381</sup> By May, he wrote President Diem that, in his view, "practically all military programs have been completed or are well on the way to completion." Despite the beliefs of the lower echelon advisors and the press, COMUSMACV was "confident that 1963 shall be called the year of victory."<sup>382</sup>

Optimism only explains a portion of Harkins' belief. Expressing his confusion about the lack of faith in the South Vietnamese in late 1962, he perhaps intimated his inability to understand the true situation in Vietnam. His military background certainly did not provide him a body of knowledge from which to draw. Ap Bac was something new to Vietnam, a fact PACOM recognized by characterizing it as "one of the bloodiest and costliest battles of [the] S[outh] Vietnam[ese] War. . . . This is one of [the] first instances where [the] VC have elected to stand and fight."<sup>383</sup> Yet COMUSMACV simply dismissed it as a case of getting "a bear by the tail and [not] let[ting] go of it." Compared to his experiences with much larger engagements and battles during World War II and Korea, this may have been true, but this analogy was not applicable to the insurgency in Vietnam. Focusing on the village of Ap Bac and not the South Vietnamese

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<sup>381</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. III, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 38, 45.

<sup>382</sup>Ibid., 296, 299-300.

<sup>383</sup>Msg, CINCUSARPAC to AIG 931 et al., 040240ZJAN63. (Frames 186-187, reel 4, JFK).

people as "the objective," he, like his predecessors, manifested his inability to grasp the subtleties of insurgency warfare.

Besides optimism, Harkins' sincere desire to believe South Vietnamese reports also colored his view. During a briefing to General Krulak, an ARVN briefing officer listed the 7th Division strategic hamlet status as 123 hamlets in the division area. The American advisor to the division, Lieutenant Colonel Fred Ladd, qualified the briefer's remarks by stating that there were actually only eight hamlets worthy of the title. Instead of supporting one of his subordinates, or querying him in private, Harkins' rebuked him in front of the entire group, claiming that the Americans had no business doubting the South Vietnamese statistics.<sup>384</sup> To COMUSMACV, it was an inherent responsibility of all Americans to believe and accept their counterparts' reports.

This policy of believing reports affected CINCPAC, the JCS, and the White House as well. Not one month after Ap Bac, Admiral Felt expressed his belief that the war in Vietnam would be over by the end of 1966. Even the administration was not immune from the optimistic appraisals of progress in Vietnam. In his State of the Union Address, delivered less than two weeks after the battle, President Kennedy proclaimed that "[t]he spearpoint of aggression has been blunted in South Vietnam."<sup>385</sup> Secretary of State Rusk echoed the president's assessment at a foreign policy conference by stating:

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<sup>384</sup>Hilsman, 499.

<sup>385</sup>Department of State, *Foreign Policy Current Documents, 1963* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 1.

"The momentum of the communist drive has been stopped."<sup>386</sup> Despite indications to the contrary, senior American policymakers, military and civilian alike, believed that the course in Vietnam was the correct one and that it required no major changes.

Compared to later battles of the Second Indochina War, Ap Bac was rather small. Less than a regiment's worth of soldiers and only a handful of helicopters and APCs participated. The fighting lasted for only a day. When placed into context, however, Ap Bac was a critical event. It signaled the PLAF's growing strength and willingness to stand and fight against the numerically and technologically superior ARVN. It also brought to a head the growing conflict between the press in Vietnam and the U.S. government.

Yet, its greatest importance, that of "demonstrat[ing] on a grand and dramatic scale all the tiny failings of the system, all the false techniques, evasions, and frauds which had marked the war in Vietnam," was lost on senior American policymakers, civilian and military alike.<sup>387</sup> Instead of a warning sign that American policies and systems in Vietnam were not effective and a reassessment of policy was in order, Ap Bac was to them just another skirmish in the battle against North Vietnamese communism. Instead of listening to those advisors closest to the action and more attuned to the realities in Vietnam, like Vann and Porter, senior American officials drew their own

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<sup>386</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>387</sup>Halberstam, 147.

conclusions concerning what was transpiring in Vietnam. In the end, “[t]he Americans in Saigon [and Washington] were, in fact, to do everything but learn from it.”<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>388</sup>Ibid.

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## APPENDIX A

### BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

February	1930	ICP established
August	1930	Nghe-Tinh soviets
September	1940	Bac Son uprising
February	1941	Bac Son Guerrilla Unit established
May	1941	AFNS established
December	1944	Propaganda Brigade of the Vietnamese Liberation Army established
September	1950	MAAGI established
December	1950	VNA established
March	1951	Lao Dong established
May	1954	Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu
July	1954	Geneva Accords
November	1954	Hinh incident
February	1955	TRIM established
April	1955	VNA offensive against Binh Xuyen
October	1955	RVN established/VNA becomes ARVN
April	1956	Final elements of FEC depart Vietnam TERM established
July	1959	PLAF attacks American advisory detachment at Bien Hoa PLAF agitates against GVN elections
January	1960	PLAF attack 32d ARVN Regiment at Tran Sup

December	1960	NLF established
February	1961	PLAF officially established
September	1961	PLAF Kontum offensive
November	1961	Taylor report
February	1962	MACV established
October	1962	PLAF destroy ARVN ranger platoon
January	1963	Battle of Ap Bac Wheeler visit
June-July	1963	Krulak visit

APPENDIX B  
KEY AMERICAN LEADERS IN VIETNAM<sup>1</sup>

Table 1: Key American Leaders and Their Dates of Assignment

Organization	Leader	Assumed Duties	
U.S. Legation	Edmund Gullion	17 February	1950
	Donald Heath	06 July	1950
U.S. Embassy	Donald Heath	25 June	1952
	G. Frederick Reinhardt	10 May	1955
	Eldridge Durbrow	20 March	1957
	Frederick Nolting	21 April	1961
USMAAG, Indochina	BG Francis Brink	10 October	1950
	MG Thomas Trapnell	01 August	1952
USMAAG, Vietnam	LTG John O'Daniel	12 February	1954
	LTG Samuel Williams	24 October	1955
	LTG Lionel McGarr	01 September	1960
	MG Charles Timmes	01 July	1962
USMACV	GEN Paul Harkins	08 February	1962

<sup>1</sup>Department of the Army, *Command and Control*, 89.

## APPENDIX C

### PRINCIPLES OF WAR<sup>1</sup>

objective	"Every military operation must be directed toward a clearly defined, decisive and attainable objective. . . . The ultimate military objective of war is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to fight."
offensive	"Offensive action is necessary to achieve decisive results and to maintain freedom of action."
mass	"Superior combat power must be concentrated at the critical time and place for a decisive purpose."
economy of force	Economy of force "does not imply husbanding but rather the measured allocation of available combat power to the primary task as well as secondary tasks . . . in order to insure sufficient combat power at the point of decision."
maneuver	"The object of maneuver is to dispose a force in such a manner as to place the enemy at a relative disadvantage and thus achieve results which would otherwise be more costly in men and materiel."
unity of command	"Unity of command obtains unity of effort by the coordinated action of all forces toward a common goal."
security	"Security is achieved by measures taken to prevent surprise, preserve freedom of action, and deny the enemy information of friendly forces."
surprise	"Surprise results from striking an enemy at a time, place, and in a manner for which he is not prepared."

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<sup>1</sup>"The principles of war are fundamental truths governing the prosecution of war. Their proper application is essential to the exercise of command and to successful conduct of military operations." Department of the Army, *Field Service Regulations-Operations*, 1962, 46-48.

simplicity

“Direct, simple plans and clear, concise orders minimize misunderstanding and confusion.”

## APPENDIX D

### OPERATIONAL TERMS

avenue of approach	"An air or ground route of an attacking force of a given size leading to its objective or to key terrain in its path." <sup>2</sup>
close air support (CAS)	"Air action against hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly forces and that requires detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces." <sup>3</sup>
combat power	"Combat power is a combination of the physical means available to a commander and the moral strength of his command. It is significant only in relation to the combat power of opposing forces." <sup>4</sup>
concealment	"The protection from observation or surveillance." <sup>5</sup>
cover	"Natural or artificial protection from enemy observation and fire." <sup>6</sup>
doctrine	"[T]he accepted body of ideas concerning war. . . . Doctrine does not, however, alleviate the requirement for sound judgement." <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Department of the Army, *Operational Terms and Symbols*. Field Manual 101-5-1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), 1-8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 1-15.

<sup>4</sup>Department of the Army, *Field Service Regulations-Operations*, 1962, 48.

<sup>5</sup>Department of the Army, *Operational Terms and Symbols*, 1-18.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 1-21.

<sup>7</sup>John Alger, *Definitions and Doctrine of the Military Art* (Wayne, NJ: Avery Publishing Group, 1985), 7.

fields of fire	“The area that a weapon or a group of weapons may effectively cover with fire from a given position.” <sup>8</sup>
firepower	“It is the amount of fire that may be delivered by a position, unit, or weapon system.” <sup>9</sup>
key terrain	“Any locality or area the seizure, retention, or control of which affords a marked advantage to either combatant.” <sup>10</sup>
leadership	“The most essential dynamic of combat power. . . [it] provide[s] purpose, direction, and motivation in combat.” <sup>11</sup>
maneuver	“[T]he movement of combat forces to gain positional advantage, usually in order to deliver-or threaten delivery of-direct and indirect fires.” <sup>12</sup>
obstacle	“Any natural or man-made obstruction that canalizes, delays, restricts, or diverts movement of a force.” <sup>13</sup>
protection	“[C]onserves the fighting potential of a force so that commanders can apply it at the decisive place and time.” <sup>14</sup>
strategy	“The way in which a unit commander combines and orchestrates the resources at his disposal to attain a given goal.” <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Department of the Army, *Operational Terms and Symbols*, 1-31.

<sup>9</sup>Department of the Army, *Operations*, 2-19.

<sup>10</sup>Department of the Army, *Operational Terms and Symbols*, 1-40.

<sup>11</sup>Department of the Army, *Operations*, 2-21.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 2-19.

<sup>13</sup>Department of the Army, *Operational Terms and Symbols*, 1-51.

<sup>14</sup>Department of the Army, *Operations*, 2-21.

<sup>15</sup>Alger, 5.

tactics

“The planning, training, and control of formations used by military organizations to bring about successful engagements.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

**APPENDIX E**  
**ARVN WEAPON SYSTEMS CHARACTERISTICS**

**Table 2: ARVN Weapons Systems and Their Characteristics**

WPN	MODEL	CALIBER	WGT (pounds)	LGTH (inches)	OPN TYPE	FEED DEVICE	CYCLIC RATE (rounds/ minute)	AMMO TYPES
PISTOL	M1911	.45"	2.5	8.7	blow back	7 RD magazine	N/A	BALL
CARBINE	M1	.30"	5.5	35.6	gas	15 or 30 RD magazine	N/A	BALL TRCR
RIFLE	M1	.30"	9.5	43.6	gas	8 RD internal magazine	N/A	BALL TRCR
SUB MACH GUN	M1A1	.45"	10.5	32	blow back	20 or 30 RD magazine	700	BALL
AUTO RIFLE	M1918	.30"	19.4	47.8	gas	20 RD magazine	550 hi 350 lo	BALL AP TRCR
MACH GUN	M1919	.30"	45 (w/tripod)	41	short recoil	disintegrating link belt	400	BALL TRCR
MACH GUN	M2	.50"	128 (w/tripod)	65	short recoil	disintegrating link belt	450	BALL AP INCEN TRCR
ROCKET LNCHR	M20	3.75"	13	60.25	ELECT	N/A	N/A	HE AT WP

## APPENDIX F

### U.S. ARMY/ARVN VEHICLE/AIRCRAFT CHARACTERISTICS

**Table 3: U.S. Army/ARVN Vehicle and Aircraft Characteristics**

VEHICLE	MODEL	WEIGHT (pounds)	LENGTH	CREW	PAX CAPACITY	OPERATING RADIUS (miles)	SPEED (mph)
ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER	M113	20000 (empty) 24594 (loaded)	15' 11"	2	10	300	40 road 22 off
AIRPLANE "Bird Dog"	L-19	1542 (empty) 2142 (loaded)	25'	1	1	250	115 max 98 cruise
HELICOPTER "Shawnee"	H-21	8900 (empty) 15000 (loaded)	86' 4"	2	20	280	127 max 101 cruise
HELICOPTER "Iroquois"	UH-1A	4020 (empty) 9195 (loaded)	52' 10"	2 or 4	6	230	120 max 106 cruise
HELICOPTER "Iroquois"	UH-1B	4502 (empty) 11206 (loaded)	52' 11"	2 or 4	8	253	138 max 126 cruise

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